EXHIBIT B-4

If This Kiss Is Going to Start a War, it May as Well Be Worth It

ia's words are still ringing in my ears several hours later as I'm trying to figure out what to wear to Jaxon's room for our...date. Logically, I know he won't care, but I care. I haven't exactly been at my best since I got to Katmere, and just once I'd like to knock his socks off.

"You should go with the red dress," Macy says from where she's sitting cross-legged on my bed, watching me agonize over my clothes choice. "Guys love red. And that dress is killer, if I do say so myself."

She's right. The dress is amazing, but... "You don't think it's too obvious?"

"What's wrong with obvious?" she demands. "You're crazy about him. He obviously feels a whole lot of something for you or he wouldn't have nearly ripped Cole's throat out in the lounge today. There's nothing wrong with letting him know you dressed up for him."

"I know that. It's just..." I hold up her red dress for the ten millionth time. "This is a lot of dressing up."

"There's not enough material for it to be a lot of anything," Macy snickers.

"Yeah, that's kind of my point."

The red dress is amazing, no doubt about it. And I bet it looks gorgeous on Macy. But with all its geometric cuts and angles and the absolute lack of fabric near anything important, it's about as far from my usual style as I can get. Which is fine, I guess, except whatever happens with Jaxon tonight (or doesn't happen), I want it to happen when I look and feel like me.

"I think I'm going to go with the yellow one," I decide, reaching for the dress in question. It still has spaghetti straps, but the neckline is a little higher than the red one, and it should actually hit below my knees when I put it on, versus the top half of my thighs, like the red one.

"Seriously? That's my least favorite one of the bunch." Macy makes grabby hands for it, but I move back so it's out of her reach. "I mean, my dad picked it out for me."

"Well, I like it. And the fact that it doesn't scream that I want to get naked with him."

"Says the girl who got up to all kinds of naughty stuff in his room today," she says with a smirk.

"I never should have told you that! And it's not like we got naked. We just made out." I take off my uniform and slip into the dress. "The dress is just to make a point."

"And what point is that exactly?" She gets off the bed and starts tugging on the skirt to help it fall into place over my ridiculous curves. "Oh, right. The point that you lust after Jaxon's sexy, sexy body."

"I thought you didn't like Jaxon." I shoot her a smug look. "I mean, aren't you the one who told me how dangerous he was and that I should stay far, far away from him?"

"And look how well you listened." She crosses to her dresser and starts opening and closing the myriad assortment of little doors on the jewelry box she has perched on the top of it. "Besides, just because he scares me doesn't mean I can't appreciate how sexy he is for you," she says in a deliberately deep and funny voice. "Plus that gorgeous bite mark he left on you? *Swoon*."

Swoon is right. Every time I see it in the mirror, it makes me want to melt. "Everything about Jaxon is gorgeous to me," I tell her as she crosses back over to me, a pair of dangling gold earrings in her hand.

"Try not to salivate on the dress," she answers dryly. "Drool is so last decade."

I stick my tongue out at her, but she just crosses her eyes at me. "Save that for Jaxon."

"Oh my God! Are you trying to embarrass me to death before I ever make it to his room?"

"What's there to be embarrassed about? You're head over heels for him; he's head over heels for you... I say go for it."

"Can you please just give me the earrings so I can get out of here?" I demand, holding my hand out for them.

"Stay still and I'll put them in for you. The clasp is kind of tricky." She leans over and slides one of the earrings into my earhole. "Wow, you smell good enough to eat... Oops. I mean drink."

"I swear to God, Macy..."

"Okay, okay, I'll stop messing with you." She moves to put the second earring in. "It's just so fun to watch you blush."

"Yeah. So much fun," I deadpan as she struggles to fasten the second earring.

Finally the clasp slides into place, and she steps back. "How do you stay so still?" she asks as she straightens out the skirt of my dress. "I swear you're a statue. It barely felt like you were breathing while I was putting that earring in."

"Terror that you were going to slip and rip the thing out of

my ear. Or poke me in the eye," I tease.

She makes a face at me as I slip my feet into the one nice pair of heels I brought with me. They're nude and strappy, so they go with almost anything. Including, thankfully, this yellow dress.

"So how do I look?" I do a little twirl in the center of the room.

"Like you're going to need another blood transfusion by the time Jaxon's done with you."

"Macy! Stop it!"

She just grins as I make my way to the door. "Seriously, you look amazing. You're going to knock that vamp's socks off."

This time when I blush, it's from excitement. "You really think so?"

"I know so." She motions for me to twirl around again, so I do. "Also, I'll bet you ten bucks that dress is going to be missing buttons when you finally make it back here."

"Okay, that's it!" I give her a mock glare as I head for the door.

But she just grins and crosses her eyes at me, all of which makes me laugh ridiculously hard. And calms me down, which I know is exactly what she was intending.

It's so strange. Before this week, I hadn't seen Macy in ten years. We were virtual strangers. And now I can't imagine going back to life without her.

"Don't wait up," I say as I make my way out the door.

"Yeah, like that's going to happen," she tells me with a snort. "FYI, I'm going to need all the details. And I mean all. So you should probably pay really close attention to everything that happens so you get them right."

"Absolutely," I agree, just to tease her. "I'll take notes. That way I won't forget anything."

"You think you're being funny, but I'm serious. Notes would be extremely helpful."

I roll my eyes. "Goodbye, Macy."

"Come on, Grace! Let a girl live vicariously through you, will ya?"

"Why don't you go find Cam? Do a little non-vicarious living of your own?"

She considers it. "Maybe I will."

"Good. And you should totally wear the red dress when you do. After all, guys love it when you're obvious."

She flips me off and throws a pillow at me that I only narrowly manage to dodge.

"Temper, temper," I tease, then hightail it out the door before she decides to throw something at me that will really hurt. Or, you know, cast some kind of spell that makes all my hair fall out. There are perils to living with a witch, after all.

My palms are sweating and my heart is beating a little too fast as I make my way to the tower room. Maybe I should have come up right after classes, like I wanted to, because all the preparation—the hair, the makeup, the dress deliberation—has done is give me more time to think.

And more time to get nervous.

Which is ridiculous. This is Jaxon. He's seen me falling out of a tree and nearly bleeding to death. He's saved my life several times since I got here. He's seen me looking my worst—why am I suddenly so determined that he see me looking my best? It's not like I actually think he cares if I straighten my hair and put on high heels.

I tell myself all of this on the way to his room—and I even believe it. But my hands are still trembling when I knock on his door. And so are my knees.

Jaxon opens the door with a sexy grin that turns to total blankness the second he sees me. Which is definitely *not* the reaction I was hoping for after spending the last two hours getting ready.

"Am I early?" I ask, discomfort suddenly racing through me. "If you want, I can come back later—"

I break off as he reaches for my wrist and gently tugs me into his room—and his arms. "You look gorgeous," he murmurs against my ear as he hugs me tight. "Absolutely beautiful."

The ball of tension in my stomach dissolves as soon as he wraps himself around me.

As soon as I smell the sexy orange and fresh water scent of him.

As soon as I feel the strength and power of his body against and around my own.

"You look pretty amazing yourself," I tell him. And he does, with his ripped jeans and bright-blue cashmere sweater. "I think this is the first time I've seen you wearing something other than black."

"Yeah, well, let's keep that between us."

"Absolutely." I keep my arms wrapped around his waist as I grin up at him. "Wouldn't want to mess up that badass reputation of yours."

He rolls his eyes. "What is it about my reputation you're so obsessed with?"

"The fact that everybody feels like they need to warn me against being with you. Obviously. I've never dated anyone like you before."

I'm teasing, but the second the words leave my mouth, I want to take them back. After all, it was only this morning he was telling me how worried he is about hurting me. Just because that fear seems ridiculous to me, considering he's never been anything but gentle with me, doesn't mean he doesn't take it very, very seriously.

Sure enough, Jaxon pulls away. I try to grab on, but there's no holding him if he wants to go.

"I hurt you once, Grace," he says after a second, eyes and voice deadly serious. "It's not going to happen again."

"First of all, let's be clear. *You* didn't hurt me. A piece of flying glass hurt me. And secondly, I know I'm safe with you. I already told you. I wouldn't be here if I thought otherwise."

He studies me for a second, like he's trying to decide if I'm telling the truth. He must decide I am, because eventually he nods, reaches for me again. And this time when he pulls me against him, he lowers his head and presses his lips to mine.

It's different than the kiss we shared earlier, softer, gentler. But it reaches inside me all the same. Lights me up. Turns me inside out with everything I feel for him and everything I hope he'll let himself feel for me.

But tonight isn't about wishing for what might be. It's for celebrating what is, so I lock that thought down deep inside me and hold on to Jaxon with everything I have. And everything I am.

The kiss lasts forever, the soft whisper of his mouth against mine, and still he pulls away too soon. Still I'm clutching at him, fingers tangled in his shirt, my body straining against his as I try desperately to hold him to me for just a little longer.

But when I finally let him go, when I finally open my eyes, the Jaxon staring down at me isn't the one I'm used to seeing. There's no regret in his dark eyes, no scowl on his face. Instead, he looks lighter, happier than I've ever seen him.

It's a good look on him, one that has me breathless for a whole host of different reasons. I wonder if he feels the same way about me, because for several long seconds, we don't move at all. We just stare at each other, eyes locked, breaths held, fingers entwined.

There's a bubble of emotion inside me, and it grows with every second I get to look at him. Every second I get to touch him.

It's been so long since I've felt it that it takes me a few minutes to recognize it as happiness.

Eventually, he turns away, and the loss I feel is a physical ache inside me. "What are you doing?" I ask, watching as he rummages in his closet.

"Much as I love that dress, you need a hoodie," he answers, pulling out a heavy fur-lined one from The North Face...in black, of course.

He slides my arms into the sleeves, zips it up. Pulls the hood over my head. Then he grabs the red blanket off the end of his bed and says, "Come on."

He reaches a hand out to me, and I take it—how could I not? Right now, there isn't anywhere I wouldn't follow this boy.

And that's before he pulls back the curtains that cover his window, and I get my first look at what's waiting for us.

What Could Possibly Be More Interesting than Kissing Me?

h my God!" I gasp, all but running to the window. "Omigod! How did you know?"

"You've only mentioned them like, three different times," he answers, sliding the window open and climbing onto the parapets before holding his hand out to me.

I follow him outside, my eyes glued to the sky spread in front of us. It's lit up like one giant rainbow, the background an incredible, intense purple while swirls of periwinkle and green and red dance across it.

"The northern lights," I breathe, so caught up in the incomparable beauty of them that I barely feel the cold...or Jaxon draping his super-warm blanket around me.

"So do they live up to your expectations?" he asks, wrapping his arms around me from behind so that I'm snuggled up in the blanket and his arms.

"They're even better," I tell him, a little astonished at how intense the colors are and how fast the lights are moving. "I've only seen pictures before this. I didn't know they'd actually move like this."

"This is nothing," he answers, pulling me closer. "It's early

yet. Wait until they really get going."

"You mean there's more?"

He laughs. "So much more. The higher the velocity of the solar winds hitting the atmosphere, the faster they dance."

"And the colors are all about the elements, right? The green and red are oxygen and the blue and purple are nitrogen."

He looks impressed. "You know a lot about the lights."

"I've loved them since I was a kid. My dad painted a mural on my bedroom wall when I was seven. Told me he'd bring me here to see them one day." I can't help thinking about how he didn't get to keep that promise. And about all the other promises that were lost when he was.

Jaxon nods and hugs me tighter. Then he turns me around so that I'm facing him. "Do you trust me?"

"Of course I do." The answer is instinctive and comes from the deepest, most primitive part of me.

He knows it, too. I can see it in the way his eyes widen, feel it in the way his heart is suddenly thudding heavily against my own. "You didn't even have to think about it," he whispers, fingers stroking reverently down my face.

"What's there to think about?" I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him down for a kiss. "I know you'll take care of me."

He closes his eyes then, rests his forehead against mine for a few moments before taking my mouth with his.

He kisses me like he's starving for me. Like his world depends on it. Like I'm the only thing that matters to him.

I kiss him right back the same way, until I can barely breathe and the colors behind my eyes are brighter than the aurora borealis. Until it feels like I'm flying.

"Maybe I should have asked if you're afraid of heights," Jaxon murmurs after a few minutes, his lips still pressed against mine.

"Heights? Not really," I answer, sliding my hands through

crave

his hair and trying to get him to kiss me again.

"Good." He moves my right hand until it's at my throat, so that I'm able to keep the blanket around me by clutching both corners in one fist. "Hold on to that blanket."

And then he grabs my left hand and spins me out fast and sharp, like they used to do in those old-time swing dances.

I gasp at the fast, jerky movement—and the fact that through it all, I can't feel the ground beneath my feet. Then scream a few seconds later as I get my first good look at the sky since Jaxon started to kiss me.

We're no longer on the parapet looking up at the northern lights. Instead, we're floating at least a hundred feet above the top of the castle, and somehow it feels like we're right in the middle of the aurora borealis.

"What are you doing?" I demand when I can finally get the words out past the terrified lump in my throat. "How are we flying?"

"I think *floating* is a better description of what we're doing," Jaxon tells me with a grin.

"Flying, floating. Does it matter?" I clutch his hand with all my might. "Don't drop me."

He laughs. "I'm telekinetic, remember? You're not going anywhere."

"Oh, right." The truth of that gets through to me, has me relaxing, just a tiny bit, the death grip I've got on him. And for the first time since we started floating, I really look at the sky around us.

"Oh my God," I whisper. "This is the most incredible thing I've ever seen."

Jaxon just laughs and pulls me back in, this time with my back against his chest so I can see everything and feel him wrapped around me at the same time.

And then he spins us around and around and around through the lights.

It's the ride of a lifetime, better than anything Disneyland or Six Flags could ever dream up. I laugh all the way through it, loving every second of it.

Loving the thrill of whirling across the sky with the lights.

Loving the feeling of dancing through the stars.

Loving even more that I get to do it all wrapped in Jaxon's arms.

We stay up for hours, dancing and floating and spinning our way through the most spectacular light show on earth. On one level, I know I'm cold—even wrapped up in the jacket, with Jaxon curled around me and the aurora borealis spread out across the sky in front and behind me—but on all the important levels, I barely feel it. How can I when the joy of being here, in this moment, with Jaxon makes it impossible to focus on anything else?

Eventually, though, he brings us back down to the parapet. I want to argue, want to beg him to keep us up just a little bit longer. But I don't know how his telekinesis works, don't know how much energy and power it took for him to keep us up there as long as he did.

"And you thought vampires were only good for biting things," he murmurs into my ear when we're once again standing on solid ground.

"I never said that." I turn in to him and press my mouth against his neck, loving the way his breath catches in his throat the moment I put my lips on him. "In fact, I think you're good for a lot of things."

"Do you now?" He pulls me closer, drops kisses on my eyes, my cheeks, my lips.

"I do." I slide my hands into the back pockets of his jeans and

revel in the way he shudders at my touch. "Though, not going to lie, the biting is pretty impressive too."

I lift my mouth for another kiss, but he steps away before I can press my lips against his. I start to follow him, but he just smiles and rubs his thumb across my bottom lip. "If I start to kiss you now, I'm not going to want to stop."

"I'm okay with that," I answer as I try to plaster our bodies together.

"I know you are." He grins. "But I have something I want to do first."

"What could possibly be more interesting than kissing me?" I joke.

"Absolutely nothing." He drops a quick kiss on my lips and then takes a big step back. "But I'm hoping this comes in a close second. Shut your eyes."

"Why?"

He gives a heavy mock sigh. "Because I asked you to. Obviously."

"Fine. But you better still be here when I open them up."

"You're in my room. Where else would I be?"

"I don't know, but I'm not taking any chances." I narrow my eyes at him. "You have a bad habit of disappearing whenever things get...interesting."

He grins. "That's because I'm usually afraid if I stay any longer, I'll bite you. Now that I know you don't mind, I won't have to run quite so fast."

"Or you could just not run at all." I tilt my head to the side in an obvious invitation.

His eyes go from their normal darkness to the pure black of blown-out pupils, and I shiver in anticipation. At least until he says, "You're not going to sidetrack me, Grace. So just do us both a favor and close your eyes."

"Fine." I pout a little, but I do as he says. After all, the sooner we get past this, the sooner I'll be able to kiss him again. "Do your worst."

His laugh is a warm breath of air against my ear. "Don't you mean my best?"

"With you, I never know." I wait impatiently for him to do whatever it is he's going to do—at least until I feel his chest pressed around my back and his arms on either side of me. "What—?"

"You can open your eyes now," he says.

I do and then nearly fall over in shock. "What...?"

"Do you like it?" he asks, his voice soft and uncertain in a way I've never heard from him before.

"It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." I lift a trembling hand to the necklace he's holding just a few inches in front of me, brush my finger across the *huge* rainbow-colored gemstone hanging in the center of the gold chain. "What is it?"

"It's a mystic topaz. Some jewelers call it the aurora borealis stone because of the way the colors flow together."

"I can see why." The cut of the stone is incredible, each facet carved to highlight the blues and greens and purples within it so that they bleed into one another even as they stand out. "It's gorgeous."

"I'm glad you like it." He lowers the necklace until the stone rests a little below my collarbone and fastens it around my neck. Then he steps back to check it out. "It looks good on you."

"I can't take this, Jaxon." I force the words out even though everything inside me is screaming for me to hold tight to the necklace and never let it go. "It's..." Huge. And I can only imagine how much it cost. More than everything I own put together, I'm pretty sure.

"Perfect for you," he says, nuzzling the pendant aside and

pressing a kiss to my skin underneath it.

"To be fair, I'm pretty sure it's perfect for any woman." Of its own volition, my hand creeps up to hold on to the stone. I don't want to give it back. "It's so beautiful."

"Well then, you're well-matched."

"Oh my God." I groan. "That was ridiculously sappy."

"Yeah," he agrees with a little you've-got-me shrug. "And you're ridiculously beautiful."

I laugh, but before I can say anything else, he's kissing me, really kissing me, and anything I was going to say flies right out of my head.

I open to him, loving the way his lips move over mine. Loving even more the way his tongue brushes against the corners of my mouth before he gently scrapes a fang across my lower lip.

I shiver as he moves lower, brushing his lips across my jaw and down my neck. I've never felt anything like this before, never imagined that I *could* ever feel something like this. It's so much, physically and emotionally, that it's almost overwhelming—but in the best way possible.

"You're cold," he says, misinterpreting the shiver. "Let's go inside."

I don't want to go inside, don't want this magical, mystical night to end just yet. But as Jaxon pulls away, the cold catches up with me, and I shiver again. That's all it takes to have him lifting me up and all but shoving me through the window.

He follows me in, then slams the window shut behind us. I reach for him, feeling a little bereft now that we're back down here in the real world instead of dancing across the sky. But I'm finding that Jaxon on a mission is not to be deterred, especially when that mission involves something he considers important to my safety or comfort. So I wrap my fingers around the pendant I never want to take off and wait for him to do his thing.

Within minutes, he's got a new blanket around me and a cup of tea in each of our hands. I take a sip to placate him, then take another one because the tea is really, really good.

"What is this?" I ask, bringing the cup to my nose so I can sniff it a little. There's orange in it, along with cinnamon and sage and a couple other scents I can't quite identify.

"It's my favorite blend of Lia's. She brought it to me this afternoon, kind of a peace offering, if you will."

"Lia?" I can't keep the surprise out of my voice, considering the conversation she and I had this morning. I take another sip. It tastes different than the tea she made me last week, spicier, but very good.

"Yeah, believe me, I know. When I opened the door, she was the last person I ever thought I'd find on the other side of it." He shrugs. "But she said you talked to her this morning and she hadn't been able to stop thinking about me since. She didn't stay long, just brought the tea and told me she was willing to try to get back to how things were if I was."

"And are you?" I ask, joy a wild thing within me at the idea of Jaxon finding a little piece of what he lost.

"I want to try," he tells me. "I don't know what that looks like or what it means, but I'm going to give it a shot. Thanks to you."

"I didn't do anything," I tell him. "It's all you two."

"I don't think so."

"I do. In fact—" I break off as he drains his tea and then sets the cup aside. His eyes are glowing in that way they do when he wants something, and my stomach does a slow roll at the realization that *I'm* what he wants.

I set my half-drunk tea aside and reach for Jaxon, everything in me straining to be close to everything in him.

He pulls me against him with a growl, burying his face in the curve between my neck and my shoulder and pressing long, slow, lingering kisses on the sensitive skin there. I shudder a little, press closer, loving the way his mouth skims over my shoulder and down my arm to the bend of my elbow. Loving just as much the way his hand slides up and down my back over the thin fabric of my dress.

Usually, when I'm with him, I'm covered in layers of clothing—sweaters, hoodies, thick fleece pants. But right now I can feel the warmth of his palm through the thin fabric of this dress. Can feel the softness of his skin as his fingertips skim over my shoulder blades.

He feels really, really good. So good, in fact, that I just lean into him and let him touch me wherever, and however, he wants.

I don't know how long we stand like that, him touching and kissing and caressing me.

Long enough for my insides to turn to melted candle wax.

Long enough for every cell in my body to catch fire.

More than long enough for me to fall even harder for Jaxon Vega.

He smells so good, tastes so good, *feels* so good that all I can think about is him. All I can want is him.

And when he scrapes his fangs across the delicate skin of my throat, everything inside me stills in anticipation.

"Can I?" he murmurs, his breath warm against my skin.

"Please," I answer, arching my neck to give him better access.

He draws a lazy circle right above my heart with his fangs. "You sure?" he asks again, and his reticence—his care—only makes me want him more.

Only makes me want *this* more.

"Yes," I manage to gasp out, my hands sliding around his waist to hold him close. "Yes, yes, yes."

It must be the reassurance he needs, because seconds later, he strikes, his fangs sinking deep inside me.

The same pleasure as earlier sweeps through me. Warm, slow, sweet. I give myself up to it, up to him, because I know that I can. Because I know that Jaxon will never take too much blood from me.

He'll never do anything that might hurt me.

I slide my hands up his back to tangle in the cool silk of his hair even as I tilt my head all the way back to give him better access. He snarls a little at the invitation, but then I feel his fangs sinking deeper, feel the pressure of his sucking getting stronger, harder.

The longer he sucks, the deeper I fall into the pleasure, and the more I want to give him.

But slowly, the warmth I feel in his arms is replaced by a chill that comes from my bones and seems to swallow me whole. A creeping lethargy comes with it, making it hard for me to think and even harder for me to move, to breathe.

For a moment, just a moment, some modicum of selfpreservation rears its head. Has me calling Jaxon's name. Has me arching back and struggling weakly against his hold.

That's when he snarls, his grip on me getting harder, tighter, as he pulls me more firmly against him. His fangs sink deeper and the moment of clarity fades as he begins to suck in earnest.

I lose all sense of time, all sense of self as I shudder and wrap myself around him. As I give myself up to Jaxon and whatever he wants from me.

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Everything kind of fades after that, so that I have no idea how much time passes before Jaxon shoves me away from him. I hit the bed and tumble onto it, where I lay, dazed, for several seconds.

Until Jaxon snarls, "Get up, Grace. Get out now!"

There's a wildness to his voice that cuts through the lethargy, at least a little. An urgency that has me opening my eyes and trying desperately to focus on him.

He's towering above me now, fangs dripping blood and face contorted with rage. His hands are curled into fists and a deep, dark growl is coming from low in his throat.

This isn't my Jaxon, the voice inside me all but screams. This caricature from every B vampire movie in existence isn't the boy I love. He's a monster, one teetering on the brink of losing all control.

"Get out," he snarls at me again, his dark eyes finally finding mine. But they aren't his eyes, not really, and I shrink back at the soulless, bottomless depths staring out at me even as the voice deep inside me echoes his words. Get out, get out!

Something's wrong with him-really wrong-and while

there's a part of me that's terrified *for* him, right now there's a much bigger part that's terrified *of* him. And that part is definitely in control as I scramble off the bed, careful not to make any movements he can interpret as the least bit aggressive.

Jaxon tracks me with his eyes, and the snarling gets worse as I start inching toward the door. But he doesn't move, doesn't make any attempt to stop me—just watches me with narrowed eyes and gleaming fangs.

Run, run, run! The voice inside me is full-on screaming now, and I'm more than ready to listen to it.

Especially when Jaxon bites out, "Get. Out."

The fear and urgency in his voice cuts right through me and has me running for the door, to hell with worrying if that will trigger the killer in him or not. He's already triggered and if I don't heed his warning, I'll have no one to blame but myself. Especially when it's obvious he's doing everything in his power to give me the chance to escape.

With that in mind, I stumble to the door as fast as my shaky legs can carry me. It's heavy, so I grab on with both hands and pull as hard as I can. But I'm weak from blood loss and it barely budges the first time. I can feel Jaxon getting closer, can feel him looming over me as I try desperately to find the strength to make the door move.

"Please," I beg. "Please, please." At this point I don't know if I'm talking to Jaxon or the door.

He must not know, either, because suddenly his hand is there on the door handle, pulling it wide open. "Go," he hisses out of the corner of his mouth.

I don't have to be told twice. I scramble over the threshold and through the reading alcove, desperate to make it to the stairs...and as far from this evil incarnation of Jaxon as I can possibly get.

It's a small alcove, only a matter of feet between me and freedom. But I'm so light-headed right now that I can barely stand upright and I sway with every step I take.

Still, I'm determined to get to the stairs. Determined to save Jaxon the pain of having killed another person that he cares about. Whatever is happening right now isn't his fault—even as messed up as I am at the moment, I can see that something is very, very wrong.

But there will be no convincing him of that if anything happens to me, no way of getting him to believe that this—whatever this is—isn't completely his fault. And so I dig deep, push myself harder than I ever have before in an effort to save myself...and in turn, save Jaxon.

I use every ounce of energy I have to make it to the top of the stairs, but I do make it. *Crawl down them if you have to*, the voice inside me yells. *Do whatever you need to do*.

I grab on to the wall, push myself around the edge of the stairs, and prepare to take my first shaky step down. Except I slam right into Lia before I can ever take that step.

"Not feeling so good, Grace?" she asks, and there's an edge to her voice that I've never heard before. "What's the matter?"

"Lia, oh thank God! Help him, please. Something's wrong with Jaxon. I don't know what it is, but he's losing control. He's—"

She slaps me across the face so hard it knocks me into the nearest wall. "You have no idea how long I've wanted to do that," she tells me. "Now sit down and shut up, or I'll let Jaxon have you."

I stare at her in shock, my sluggish brain having trouble assimilating this new turn of events. Only when Jaxon races, snarling, out of his room, does any sense of clarity kick in, brought on by the terror sweeping through me.

I'm pretty sure Lia's no match for Jaxon on a normal day—no

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one is—but now that something's wrong with him, I'm not so sure.

"Jaxon, stop!" I yell, but he's too busy putting himself between me and Lia to listen.

"Get away from her!" he orders, as things start flying off the shelves all around us.

Lia just sighs. "I knew I should have made the tea stronger. But I was afraid it would kill your little pet, and I couldn't let that happen. At least not yet."

She shrugs, then says in a kind of singsong voice, "No worries," right before she pulls a gun out of her pocket and shoots Jaxon straight in the heart.



scream, try to get to him, but all I manage to do is fall to my knees. I'm weak and dizzy and nauseous...so nauseous. The room is spinning and waves of cold are sweeping through my body, tightening my muscles and making it impossibly hard to breathe, to move.

And still I try to reach Jaxon. I'm sobbing and screaming as I crawl across the floor, terrified that she's killed him. I know it's not easy to kill a vampire, but I'm pretty sure that if anyone would know how to do it, it would be another vampire.

"God, would you shut up already!" Lia kicks me so hard in the stomach that she knocks the breath out of me. "I didn't kill him. I just tranq'd him. He'll be fine in a few hours. You, on the other hand, won't be so lucky if you don't stop that incessant whimpering."

Maybe she expects me to get hysterical all over again at that threat, but it isn't exactly a shock. As drugged and unable to think as I am right now, my mind is still working well enough to figure out that I won't be getting out of this alive. Which is saying something considering I can barely remember my own name at the moment.

"You should have drunk more tea," she tells me, disgust evident in her voice. "Everything would be easier if you just did what you were supposed to do, Grace."

She's looking at me like she expects me to say I'm sorry, which definitely isn't happening. Besides, what would that even look like? *Oops? So sorry I'm making it harder for you to kill me*?

Give me a break.

Lia keeps talking, but it's getting harder and harder for me to follow what she's saying. Not when the room is spinning and my head is muddled and all I can think about is Jaxon.

Jaxon, twirling me through the aurora borealis.

Jaxon, staring at me with hellish eyes.

Jaxon, telling me to run, trying to protect me even when he's drugged out of his mind.

It's enough to have me rolling over, enough to have me trying to crawl to him even though I don't have the strength anymore to push up to my knees.

"Jaxon," I call, but his name comes out so slurred I can barely understand it. Still, I try again. And again. Because the voice inside me is screaming that if Jaxon knows I'm in trouble, he'll move heaven and earth to get to me. Even if it involves waking up from a stealth-tranquilizer-gun attack.

Lia must know it, too, because she hisses, "Stop it," as she towers over me.

Which only makes me try harder. "Jaxon," I call again. This time, it's little more than a whisper, my voice failing as everything else does, too.

"I didn't want to do this the hard way," Lia says, raising the tranquilizer gun and aiming it straight at me. "When you wake up feeling like a herd of elephants is running through your head, remember you're the one who chose this."

And then she pulls the trigger.

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Double, Double, Toil and a Whole Lot of Trouble

wake up shivering. I'm cold...so cold that my teeth are chattering and everything—I mean *everything*—hurts. My head worst of all, but the rest of me is almost as bad. Every muscle in my body feels like it's being stretched on a rack, and my bones ache deep inside. Worse, I can barely breathe.

I'm awake enough to know something is wrong—like really wrong—but not quite awake enough to remember what it is. I want to move, want to at least pull the blanket from my bed up and over me, but the voice deep inside me is back. And it's ordering me to lie still. Ordering me not to move, not to open my eyes, not to even breathe too deeply.

Which won't be a problem considering I feel like a fifty-pound weight is crushing my chest—kind of like how I felt when I was fourteen and got pneumonia, only a million times worse.

I want to disregard the voice, want to roll over and find a way to get warm again. But flashes of memory are starting to come back, and they scare me into lying very, very still.

Jaxon, with hellfire burning in his eyes, shouting for me to run.

Lia brandishing a gun.

Jaxon falling over, passing out.

Lia screaming at me that everything is all my fault right before she—

Oh my God! She shot Jaxon! OmigodOmigodOmigod.

Panic slams through me, and my eyes fly open before I can think better of it. I try to sit up, determined to get to him, but I can't move. I can't sit up. I can't roll over. I can't do anything but wiggle my fingers and toes and move my head a little, though I'm still not coherent enough to figure out why.

At least not until I turn my head and see my right arm stretched out to the side and tied into an iron ring. A quick glance to the other side shows my left arm in the same predicament.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out that my legs are tied down, too, and as more of the fogginess fades, I realize that I'm spread-eagled on top of some kind of cold stone slab. And I'm wearing nothing but a thin cotton sheath, which, honestly, is just adding insult to already egregious injury.

I mean, she drugged me, shot me, and tied me up. She has to freeze me as well?

As my memories come flooding back, adrenaline surges through my system. I try to tamp it down, try to think around the sick panic winding its way through me. But with the cold and the drugs and the adrenaline, clear thinking isn't exactly easy right now.

Still, I have to figure out what happened to Jaxon. I have to know if he's alive or if she killed him. She said she wasn't going to, but it's kind of hard to trust anything she says considering her original invite for tonight was for mani-pedis and look where I am now.

Just the thought of something happening to Jaxon has emptiness yawning inside of me. Has my panic turning to terror. I have to get to him. I have to figure out what happened. I have

to do something.

For the first time since coming to Katmere Academy, I wish I had some supernatural powers of my own. Namely the power to break through rope. Or teleport. Hell, I'd even take a shadow of Jaxon's telekinesis at this point—something, anything that might possibly get me untied and off this horrible rock.

I shake my head a little, struggle to clear the light-headed, packed-with-cotton feeling that's going on in there. And try to figure out how the hell I'm supposed to get these ropes off me before Lia comes back from whatever level of hell she's currently visiting.

Wherever I am, it's dark. Not pitch black, obviously, because I can see my hands and feet and a little beyond where I'm lying. But that's it. Only about four feet past my hands and feet in every direction, but after that it's really dark. Like really, really dark.

Which isn't terrifying at all considering I'm in the middle of a school filled with things that go bump in the night. Lucky, lucky me.

I think about screaming, but the chill in the air tells me I'm not actually inside the main school anymore. Which means there probably isn't anyone around to hear me—except Lia, and I definitely don't want to attract her attention one second sooner than she wants to give it to me.

So, I do the only thing possible in this situation. Strain against the ropes as hard as I can. I mean, I know I'm not going to be able to break free from them, but rope stretches if you pull on it long and hard enough. If I can just get some wiggle room around one of my wrists, I can slip my hand through, and I'll at least have a fighting chance.

Okay, maybe not a fighting chance. More like a teeny tiny chance. But at this point, I'm not exactly complaining. Any chance, no matter how small, is better than just lying here,

waiting to die.

Or worse.

I don't know how long I tug and strain against the ropes, but it feels like a lifetime. It's probably more like eight to ten minutes, but terrified and alone in the dark, it feels like so many more.

I try to concentrate on what I'm doing, try to put all my focus into escaping and nothing else. But it's hard when I don't know where Jaxon is, when I don't know what's happened to him or if he's even alive. Then again, if I don't get out of here, I'll never know.

It's that thought that has me pulling harder, twisting back and forth with more determination than ever. My wrists hurt now—big surprise—the rubbing back and forth against the ropes chafing them raw. Since I can't do anything about the pain, I ignore it and twist faster even as I strain to hear any sound that might indicate Lia is coming back.

For now I don't hear anything but the rasp of my wrists against the ropes, but who knows how long that will last.

Please, I whisper to the universe. Please, just work with me a little here. Please, just let me get one arm free. Please, please, please.

The pleading doesn't work. Then again, I didn't actually expect it to. It didn't work after my parents died, either.

The chafing on my wrists has given way to intense pain—and a slippery wetness that I'm very much afraid is blood. Then again, the fluid is making it easier to turn my wrist now, so maybe bleeding isn't the worst thing that could happen in this situation. At least if it helps get me out of here before a vampire or seven show up to finish me off.

For the first time, I understand—really understand—why an animal caught in a trap is willing to chew its own foot off to escape. If I thought it would give me a fighting chance, and if I

could reach my wrist, I might be tempted to do the same thing. Especially since this yanking and pulling doesn't seem to be—

My left hand slips, nearly comes out of the rope. I'm so surprised that I almost cry out in relief and maybe blow everything. Paranoid about letting a sound escape—although I don't actually think it's paranoia considering the situation I currently find myself in—I lock my jaw in place to keep the sounds of excitement and pain from spilling out into this pitch-dark room.

Ignoring the pain, ignoring the panic, ignoring everything but the fact that I am so close to getting one hand free, I twist and strain with every ounce of strength in my body, so hard and so long that it's almost a shock when my hand finally slips free from the rope.

The pain is excruciating, and I can feel blood running down my hand, slipping between my fingers and along my palm. I don't even care, though, not now when I'm so close to finding a way out of this. I twist my body and reach for my other wrist—not the easiest thing to do when I'm spread-eagled. With my legs tied as tightly as they are, I can only twist a little bit, but it's enough to reach my right hand.

Enough to maybe have a fighting chance at breaking completely free.

Slipping my fingers in between the ropes and my right wrist, I start pulling as hard as I can. The bizarre twisting adds another layer of pain to the mix, but once again I ignore it. I'm pretty sure any pain I feel now is nothing compared to what I'll feel once Lia decides to...do whatever it is she's planning on doing.

Finally, the rope on this wrist slips, too, and I manage to slide my right hand free as well. Somehow the hope that comes with that little bit of freedom makes me panic more, and it takes every ounce of concentration I have not to cry as I sit up and

start fumbling with the ropes around my ankles.

Every second feels like an eternity as I strain my ears in a desperate attempt to listen for Lia. I don't know why it matters so much; it's not like I'll be able to lie back down and fake it if she shows up. All this blood pretty much negates any chance of that ever happening.

Just the thought has me doubling my already frantic efforts, yanking on the ropes and pulling against them until my fingers and ankles are as raw and bloody as my wrists.

The rope around my right ankle finally gives a little bit. Not enough to get my foot through, but more than enough to have me concentrating solely on that side.

Another minute and a half, I'm guessing, and I've got my right foot free, which leaves me to concentrate on the left foot with everything I've got. At least until a high pitched scream slices through the cold air and has pretty much every hair on my body standing straight up—especially when the scream echoes around and around me.

It's Lia, I know it. My blood runs cold, and for a second I can't move, can't think through the terror. But then the voice is back, cutting through the fear and ordering me to *Hurry*, *hurry*, *hurry*.

I start tearing at the rope, no longer caring if I dig deep furrows into my skin as I try desperately to untie it. Try desperately to escape.

"Please, please," I mutter to the universe again. "Please."

I have no idea where I am, no idea if I actually manage to get loose if I can even get out of this place without freezing to death when I step outside. Just the idea of being trapped here has the panic simmering right below the surface rearing its ugly head again.

crave

One problem at a time, I remind myself. Get free from the restraints and then worry about what comes next. Everything else, no matter how terrible, is still a step up from being tied to a stone table like some kind of human sacrifice.

My breath catches in my throat at the thought, a sob welling up within me. But I push the tears back down where they belong. Later, I can cry.

Later, I can do a lot of things.

For now, I need to get off this altar or whatever the hell it is. I need to escape and I need to figure out what's happening to Jaxon. Everything else can wait.

The rope gives—thankyouthankyou—and I manage to wiggle my foot out without sacrificing too many layers of skin.

The moment I'm free, I jump off the table...and nearly fall flat on the ground. Now that I'm standing, I realize just how woozy I still am. I thought the adrenaline would burn through the drugs lingering in my system, but they must be really strong drugs. Or I must not have been lying on that table as long as I thought I was...

Still, I take a deep breath and focus. Try to see through the dizziness to figure out where I am...and how to get the hell out of here before crazy, crazy Lia finds her way back.

Another scream rends the air, and I freeze—then run. I don't even know where I'm running to, but I figure if I make my way along the walls, I'll find a door eventually. And if I'm lucky, it'll be on the early side of eventually.

But I've barely taken a step before a roar follows the scream, this one deep and powerful and completely animalistic. For a second, just a second, I think it might be Jaxon, and a new rush of terror slams through me.

Then logic reasserts itself—I've heard Jaxon sound a lot of different ways, but never like that. Never like an animal with no

human qualities at all.

There's another roar, followed by the sound of something slamming into the wall. Another scream, some growls, something breaking, something hitting the wall again.

Lia's obviously in a fight, and I should take the opportunity to find a way out and run like hell. Except what if I'm wrong? What if the person making those growls and roars is Jaxon. What if he's as dizzy as I am and can't fight her off? What if—

I take off running toward the wall that I can hear things clattering against. It's a dumb move—the dumbest—but I have to know if it's Jaxon. I have to know if he's okay or if she's doing to him whatever she'd planned to do to me.

I knock my knees against something as I try to make it to the other side of what I'm beginning to realize is a huge room. Whatever I bumped tips over, and liquid splashes onto my feet and the long cotton shift Lia has me dressed in for some reason.

The water feels gross, squishing inside my toes and soaking through my dress, but I ignore it as I take off running again as fast as I can. To be honest, that's not saying all that much considering the drugs and my raw, wet feet, but I do my best. At least until what feels like a thousand candles burst to life all around me and all at the same time.

As their flames illuminate the room, I stop dead in my tracks. And wish with everything I have that I was back in the dark.

Never Do a Trust Fall with Someone Who Can Fly

t least I know exactly where I am. The tunnels. Not the part of the tunnels I've already been in, but one of the side rooms they lead to that I haven't seen before. Still, I'm sure that's where Lia has brought me. The architecture—not to mention the bone chandeliers and candelabras—is a hard decorating choice to forget.

Too bad the obviously human-bone candle holders are the least terrifying thing in the place. The same can't be said for the—at least—two dozen three-foot glass vases filled with blood that line what can only be described as an altar in the center of the room. At the center of which is a stone slab with bloodied ropes.

So, not actually that far off when I snarked about being a human sacrifice. Fantastic.

A quick glance down at my legs shows just why that "water" squishing between my toes felt so gross earlier. Because it's not water. It's blood.

I'm covered in someone else's blood.

Funny how that sets me off worse than anything else in this nightmarish hellscape. But it totally does. I manage to swallow down the scream clawing at the inside of my throat, but it's a

close thing. So close that I can't stop a little whimper from doing the same.

And that's before I turn around and see a giant green dragon flying straight toward me, wings beating fast and talons extended.

Not going to lie—I freak out. Like totally, absolutely freak the fuck out—screams absolutely included. I duck down, try to make myself as small as possible as I run for the door, but I know it's too late even before a volley of flames streams right by me, slamming into the stone wall to my right.

I jump back, try to turn around, but that little delay is all the dragon needs to get to me. Talons wrap around my upper arms, pricking my biceps, as he lifts me straight off my feet and starts flying back across the room.

I struggle against his hold, trying to get him to drop me before he gets too high. But his talons go from pricking my skin to piercing it. I gasp as new pain slams through me, but the dragon gets his wish—I stop struggling, too afraid that he'll tear me to pieces to risk it.

At the same time, I'm too terrified that he'll kill me to just do nothing, so I grab on to his feet and try to pry his talons out of and off of me. I know I'll fall, but at this point it's the best plan I can come up with. Especially considering the voice inside me that's been telling me what to do for days now is suddenly, inconveniently absent.

Unfortunately, my prying fingers only make the dragon dig in deeper, and for a second, everything goes black. I take a few deep breaths, concentrate on beating back the pain. And wonder how the hell I got myself kidnapped by both a vampire *and* a dragon in *one night*.

San Diego has never seemed so far away.

All of a sudden, the dragon sweeps down, so low that my feet can practically touch the ground. We're headed straight for the huge double doors on the other side of the room—looks like I was running in the wrong direction earlier—and that might not be a problem except for the fact that they are closed and the dragon's…hands? paws? claws?…are currently filled with me.

I shrink down, brace for impact and what I'm pretty sure is my imminent death. But about a second before we fly into them, the doors burst open and we soar right through...and over a screaming, infuriated Lia.

The dragon doesn't pause, just stretches out its wings and starts flying even faster, straight down the long hallway that I'm guessing leads toward the center portico with the huge bone chandelier.

Lia's running along below us, and she's fast enough to more than keep up. And at this point, I'm really close to losing it. Because trapped between a dragon and a vampire gives a whole new meaning to the old "rock and hard place" cliché, and that never works out well for the person in the middle.

Plus, I'm getting really sick of being dragged around by supernatural creatures. I mean, sure, I want to believe this dragon—whether it's Flint or some other kid I go to school with—is trying to rescue me, but the talons currently ripping through my arm muscles tell a different story.

At this point, I'm pretty sure the best-case scenario involves me choosing between death by dragon or death by vampire. Too bad I have no idea which one would be least painful. And does it really matter considering I'll be dead at the end, anyway?

We're moving crazy fast, so we reach the center hub of the tunnels in seconds. The only problem? We're flying straight toward the giant bone chandelier, with its hundreds of lit candles, and the dragon shows no sign of slowing down. Which, fine. He's a dragon and, I assume, fireproof. Too bad that same adjective can't be used to describe me or the cotton shift I'm wearing.

Suddenly, death by vampire bite doesn't sound so bad. Not when the alternative is burning alive in midair.

But at the last second, the dragon pulls his arms up tight to his body, with me still clutched in his talons, and dives right under the chandelier. His goal is obviously to get past it while staying as high and fast as possible. But that drop in altitude is what Lia's been waiting for, because now she's leaping off the ground and grabbing hold of the dragon's tail.

The dragon roars, tries to flick her off him, but she holds on. Seconds later, she's got her arms wrapped completely around his tail and is slamming us toward the ground as hard as she can.

Which—for the record—is really freaking hard. Especially considering the dragon doesn't let go of me while we fall.

We hit the ground with a crash. On the plus side, the dragon lets go of me on impact, and for the first time in several minutes, there are no talons digging into my arms. On the negative side, I hit the ground shoulder-first and am now seeing stars of the very not-good variety.

Plus, I can barely move my left arm. A problem that's compounded by the fact that I am also still bleeding from my wrists, my ankles, my fingers, and now my arms where the dragon was holding me. And, oh yeah, I'm being stalked by a crazy-ass vampire with ritualistic murder in her eyes.

And here I thought Alaska would be boring.

Snarls and screams sound behind me, and I scramble to my knees, trying to ignore the pain in my sprained? broken? dislocated? shoulder as I spin around in time to see Lia and the dragon going at it full force.

The dragon lashes out with a claw and slices Lia's cheek open before she jumps out of range. Seconds later, she responds by leaping onto his back and yanking his wing back so hard that he screams in agony even as he twists around and shoots fire straight at her.

She dodges but gets a little singed around the edges—which only seems to piss her off more. She plasters herself low across his back and punches a hole straight through his other wing.

The dragon screams again, then blurs into a rainbow array of colors for several seconds. When the blur of color passes, he's a boy again—and not just any boy. Flint. And he's bleeding. Not as much as I am, but the wing punch obviously hurt him if the way he hunches over as he scrambles awkwardly to his feet is any indication.

He's dressed in the ripped-up version of the clothes he was wearing and has a lot more cuts and bruises on him now. Lia seems a little worse for wear from the fall, too, but she rushes him with a primal scream that has shivers running along every nerve ending that I've got. Flint meets her halfway, arm muscles bulging as he attempts to keep her flashing fangs out of his skin. Once he's got a good grip on her, it's his turn to send her flying to the ground. Then he grabs her head and starts pounding it over and over again into the stone floor.

She's fighting him, bucking and snarling and doing everything in her power to get away from him. But he holds tight as he growls something indecipherable at her. I take their preoccupation with each other as my cue to get as far from them as I possibly can, as fast as I possibly can.

I stumble to my feet, ignoring the pain and the fact that my messed up shoulder makes it impossible for me to do anything but list to my left side. But forward movement is forward movement even in this world, and I can't stay here watching Flint and Lia try to kill each other for one second longer.

Keeping one ear on the fight behind me, I start running/hobbling through the portico, looking for the tunnel that will take me back into the school's main building. The tunnel that

will bring me back to Katmere.

I make it across the center of the room to the tunnel that's one to the side of being directly across from where Lia and Flint are fighting. But when I start to run down it, I'm torn between screaming for help and trying to go unnoticed a little while longer. And by a little while I mean long enough for me to stagger through the tunnel and into the school, where surely my Uncle Finn will put a stop to this madness.

Before the entire world explodes.

But I barely make it to the entrance to the tunnel that I think will lead me to the castle before Flint is on me. He grabs me by the hair and slams me face-first into the nearest wall.

"Flint, stop. Please," I manage to gasp out through the pain tearing through me courtesy of my injured shoulder.

"I wish I could, Grace." He sounds grim, defeated. "I thought I could get you out of here. But Lia's not going to let me. And I can't let the ticks get away with using you for what they want to do."

"Using me for what? I don't know what you're talking about."

"Lia's had a plan all along. It's why she brought you here."

"She didn't bring me here, Flint. My parents died—"

"Don't you get it? She killed your parents to get you here. We knew it for sure as soon as you arrived and the wolves got close enough to smell you.

"We were sure we'd be able to finish this long before we got here, but taking you and Lia out is one thing. Taking Jaxon out when we realized he was involved in the plan was another thing entirely."

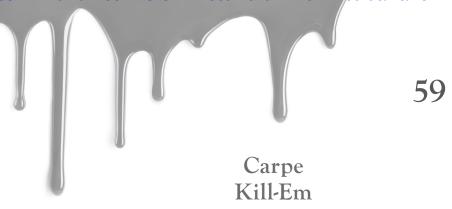
I'm reeling, his words hitting me with the full force of a wrecking ball as I scramble to make sense of them. "What are you—my parents—Jaxon—how could..." I pause, take a breath. Try to breathe through the pain and confusion and horror his

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words stir up inside me.

"Look, I don't have time to fill you in on everything. And it wouldn't change anything if I could. I want to save you, Grace. I do. But we can't let Lia do this. It'll mean the end of the world. So you've got to die. It's the only way we can stop this thing from happening." He reaches forward, wraps his hand around my neck.

And then he starts to squeeze.



top!" I gasp out, clawing frantically at his hand with my bloody fingertips. "Flint, please. You can't do this."

But Flint isn't listening. He just stares at me with broken, tear-filled eyes as he squeezes tighter and tighter.

I'm panic-stricken by this point, terrified that he's really going to do it. That he's really going to kill me...and worse, he's going do it before I know the truth behind what happened to my parents.

"Flint, stop!" I try to get more out, try to beg him to tell me what he's talking about, but the pressure on my throat is too much. I can't speak anymore, can't breathe, can hardly think as the world starts going dark around me.

"I'm sorry, Grace." He sounds tortured, devastated, but the squeeze of his fingers around my throat never falters. "I wish it didn't have to be like this. I never wanted to hurt you. I never wanted—"

He breaks off on a scream and suddenly the pressure around my neck is gone, his fingers bending back from my skin at an unnatural angle.

I gasp, try to suck air into my starving lungs via my abused

throat. It hurts, a lot, but the pain doesn't matter right now. Nothing does except being able to breathe again.

When I finally have enough oxygen inside of me to think semi-clearly again, I look around for Lia. Find her crumpled on the floor in the same spot where Flint had been beating her head against the floor with all the strength of the dragon inside him.

Convinced she isn't a threat—at least for now—I focus back on Flint who has sunk to his knees at this point. He's clutching his hands, his face a mask of agony, and for a second—just a second—I feel sorry for him. Which is bizarre considering a few moments ago he was using those very fingers to strangle me.

I beat back the sympathy and take a step away, sliding along the wall in the most unobtrusive manner I can muster. I don't know what's happening here, don't know which of the many, many supernatural forces surrounding us is responsible for Flint's suffering, but I have a pretty good idea. And if I'm right, things are about to get a million times more dicey. If I'm right, Flint is about to have a very bad—

Jaxon bursts into the room like a dragon-seeking missile, his focus completely and totally on Flint as he races across the room at an unimaginable speed. His eyes, glowing and livid and filled with violence, meet mine for a second before sliding over every inch of me as if cataloging my injuries. Moments later, he's on Flint, grabbing him by the hair and heaving him across the room into the opposite wall.

Flint hits back-first, hard enough to make the wall shake. Then Jaxon's on him, his snarls of rage filling the room and echoing off the ceiling. There's a part of me that wants to run to him, that wants to beg him to hold me and take care of me after he deals with Flint. But there's another part that can't get over Flint's words. That can't get over the casual way he said Jaxon was part of Lia's crazy plan.

It doesn't make any sense. If Jaxon was a part of her plan all along, why did she give him tea to drug him? And why did she shoot him full of tranquilizers?

No, Flint has to be wrong, I tell myself as sobs I refuse to let escape threaten to tear my chest apart. Jaxon wouldn't deliberately hurt me, and he definitely wouldn't have had anything to do with killing my parents. He wouldn't do that. He *couldn't* do that, not after everything that happened with Hudson.

Out of nowhere, Flint roars an answer to one of Jaxon's snarls, and then he starts fighting back. Jaxon's response is to send him flying once more, this time headfirst into another wall.

Anyone else would be dead after the impact Flint makes, but dragons are obviously built very different from humans—even when in their human form. Because Flint shakes off the blow then whirls around to face Jaxon once again.

But when he brings his arms up to fight, his hands are no longer human. Instead they're talons, and he punches straight out with them, aiming for Jaxon's heart.

A strangled scream escapes me, and I slap my bloodied right hand over my mouth, desperate to avoid attention even as Jaxon deflects the blow. Then he reaches out, aiming to wrap his fingers around Flint's throat the way Flint just did to me, but before Jaxon can get a good grip, Flint starts to shift.

It takes a few seconds, and Jaxon tries to stop him—or at least, that's what I think he's doing when he thrusts a hand into the magical rainbow glow that comes whenever Flint changes form. But his hand goes right through it and he doesn't grab onto anything while we both wait to see what monstrous version of Flint this new edition can add to the story.

We get our answer when he comes back into focus in his full dragon form. Tall and majestic and a sparkling emerald green, all of his power, all of his strength and determination and *fire*

are focused on Jaxon.

Who doesn't even flinch. He just plants his feet and stares down a freaking dragon like it's a gecko, waiting for an attack or an opening or who even knows what.

Except Flint is apparently as patient as Jaxon, even in dragon form, and the two circle each other for several seconds.

Jaxon seems to have calmed down. His eyes are almost back to normal and his face is totally blank, totally unreadable. Which is a good thing, because—

Suddenly, the whole tunnel shakes like it's being hit by an eight-point earthquake. Okay, not so calm, I think as my already shaky knees give way and I hit the ground, hard. I expect the shaking to stop, expect Jaxon to get control of himself, but that doesn't seem to be on his agenda as the walls start crumbling and bones start falling from the giant chandelier in the center of the room.

Flint shoots a stream of fire straight at Jaxon, who throws a hand up and deflects the fire into the nearest wall. The move seems to infuriate Flint, who lets loose with another blast of fire, this one so hot I can feel it from halfway across the room. And he doesn't let up. He keeps the fire stream going even as Jaxon continues to block it.

On the plus side, the ground stops shaking as Jaxon focuses every ounce of his power on not getting incinerated while Flint focuses every ounce of his power on doing the incinerating. At first, it looks like we've finally reached an impasse, Flint shooting fire and Jaxon holding that fire at bay. But as the seconds tick by, I realize Jaxon is doing more than just deflecting the fire. He's bending it back toward Flint and using his telekinesis to slowly—so, so slowly—push a stream of it back toward the dragon.

Part of me wants to stay and see what happens, to make sure Jaxon is okay at the end of this. But the voice inside me is finally

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back and it's urging me to run, to get away, to leave Flint and Jaxon to their fates and save myself.

Any other time, I'd ignore the voice and stay, just in case I could find a way to help Jaxon. But Flint's words keep running through my head—about how Jaxon is a part of Lia's plan, about how Lia is responsible for my parents' deaths, about how whatever they have planned can't be allowed to happen.

I still don't know if what he's saying is true or not, but if it is...if it is, I can't count on Jaxon, or anyone else, to help me. I have to escape. And I have to do it by myself.

With that thought at the front of my mind, I start moving toward the exit tunnel. I tell myself to stand up, to make a run for it, but I'm too sick and dizzy to do anything but crawl. So that's what I do. I crawl toward the tunnel, each movement an agony for my screaming shoulder and raw, aching hands.

Thankfully, Jaxon and Flint are too caught up in their battle to notice me and my slow-but-stealthy progress. I'm hoping to keep it that way as I finally reach the mouth of the tunnel.

Just a little farther, I tell myself as I make it around the corner.

Just a little farther, I repeat like a mantra as I take a second to lean back against the wall and let the pain dissipate.

Just a little farther, I say one more time as I push myself up and off the floor.

I give myself one more second to take stock—stomach rolling, knees shaking, body hurting—and then say screw it and start staggering up the tunnel as fast as my abused ankles can carry me.

I've only gone about twenty feet when something hits me from behind, sends me pitching forward, and I hit the ground all over again. Agony slices through me as my shoulder bangs against the ground, and for a second, I'm sure I'm going to pass out.

But seconds later, the pain dissipates, and as I try to wiggle away I realize my shoulder no longer hurts. Or at least, it's no longer screaming at me like it was a couple minutes ago. I must have knocked it back into position when I fell on it. Or, more specifically, when I was pushed down onto it.

Adrenaline surges through me at the thought, and I wonder if it's Jaxon who has found me. Or if it's Flint. I want it to be Jaxon—even with everything Flint said about him working with Lia—but the roughness of the shove says otherwise, as does the follow-up kick delivered to my side.

I'm panicking now, terrified that Jaxon is hurt...or worse. What if Flint was lying? What if Jaxon isn't a part of Lia's crazy plan and I just left him alone out there?

I spin around, hands raised in a pathetic defense against what I'm sure is a fire-breathing dragon. And find myself staring into Lia's wild and unhinged eyes instead. Eyes that only get more demented when she demands, "You don't actually think you're walking out of here, do you?"

on't say a fucking word," Lia continues as she grabs me by the hair and starts dragging me up the tunnel. Pain—excruciating, overwhelming, *maddening*—explodes inside of me, and I clutch at my head, trying desperately to get some relief from the searing, tearing agony of being yanked around by my hair.

It doesn't work, and for a second the pain is so sharp that I can't even think. But it doesn't take a genius to figure out that Lia's dragging me to my death. If I let her get me back into that room with the blood and the altar, I'm going to die—in what I'm pretty sure is the most awful, most gruesome manner possible.

So, to hell with her warning and to hell with staying silent. Sucking in a huge gulp of air, I let loose with the loudest, most hysterical-sounding scream I can manage while at the same time digging my nails into her hands hard enough to draw blood.

Lia curses and slams my head into the wall she's been dragging me alongside. Which dazes my already not-functioning-so-great brain but doesn't get me to shut up. Nothing is going to do that, I promise myself as I scream and scream and scream, even as I struggle to free my hair from her viselike grip.

Lia's not having it, though, because this time she turns around and kicks me in the face. Not hard enough to fracture my jaw, but more than hard enough to have me reeling backward—which has the added benefit of shutting me up despite myself as everything around me starts to go black.

"Oh, no you don't, you bitch," Lia hisses at me. And this time when she hits me, it's a sharp slap on my cheek. "You are *not* going back to sleep. The whole reason we're in this mess right now is because I need you awake for this."

That's the best incentive I can think of to make myself pass out again. But unfortunately, that doesn't seem to be in the cards, since the pain of being dragged along by my hair is definitely keeping me awake. I just hope if I survive this—or even if I don't—that I'm not completely bald by the end.

We're about halfway up the tunnel now, and Lia pauses. At first I think it's to take a break—in the grand scheme of her vampire strength, I'm pretty sure I'm not making her strain much. But with her normally impeccable clothes ripped and her bloody hair matted to her face, she's not looking so good right now. Which means, maybe she's more hurt or worn out than I think.

The idea gives me hope, and I start to struggle again, but she's got something else planned, because she's definitely not resting. Instead, she tightens the hand in my hair until I stop moving, then she puts the other hand against one of the stones about halfway up the wall and pushes as hard as she can.

The wall shifts and groans, but eventually a whole section of it opens up, revealing a *super* secret passageway in this maze full of secret passageways.

It's narrow and dark and there is nothing in the world I want less right now than to be in this stuffy, airless corridor with Lia. But as she drags me to my feet, her hand still fisted deep in my hair, it's not like I have much of a choice. Especially when she

shoves me inside first and then frog-marches me down this new alleyway.

We're only a few steps in when the secret door closes behind us. As it slams shut, I have a moment of overwhelming anguish when I realize this is it. I've exhausted all of my options, and now I'm going to die here in this crazy labyrinth of tunnels, the victim of a vampire who has gone totally and completely around the bend.

And there's not a damn thing I can do about it.

The realization hits me hard, and for a moment it takes me to a place beyond despair and beyond hope. Because unless something changes fast, all I can do is pray that whatever's coming is over quickly. Well, that and to make sure that I don't give Lia the satisfaction of seeing me break down, no matter what she does to me.

I have a sick feeling that's going to be next to impossible, but I'm still going to try. Because if I came all the way to Alaska to die, I want to do it on my terms, not hers.

And so, even as exhaustion sets in, I continue to put one foot in front of the other. Continue to walk closer and closer to the site of my own demise. And with each step, the hopelessness deep inside me turns to anger and the anger turns to rage. It fills up the emptiness, fills up the aching, until all that is left is a fire in the pit of my stomach. A white-hot flame that wants nothing more than it wants justice.

For myself and, more importantly, for my parents.

I'm here in Alaska because Lia wanted me here.

My parents are dead because Lia decided they needed to die.

She's played god with too many people's lives to just get away with it. I'm weak and exhausted and broken and human, but even I know that much. Just as I know she can't be allowed to continue with whatever insanity she has planned. All of which

means I'm going to have to do whatever I can to take her with me when I die.

I just wish I had a clue how I'm supposed to do that.

My brain makes and discards half a dozen feverish plans as we walk for what seems like forever. Eventually, though, we must get to where we are going, because Lia jerks me to a stop. She presses her hand against the wall, and seconds later, it opens just like the wall at the beginning of this passage.

All but cackling with delight, she shoves me through the open doorway and into the room where I was tied up what seems like forever ago. It seems strange to think that it's probably only been an hour or so since I woke up spread-eagled on that cold slab of rock.

Then again, it seems even stranger to think that after all the pain and frustration I've been through in the last hour, I'm about to be tied up there again.

FML. And Lia's, too.

"Move it!" she snarls, pushing me through the hundreds of lit candles to the raised altar in the center of the room. "It's almost time."

"Almost time?" I ask, figuring that getting her talking might buy me some time to think of something. Or buy me enough time for Jaxon and Flint to find me...though I'm not sure how much help either of them will be in this situation.

Flint's answer to Lia's insanity is to kill me before Lia has a chance to do whatever crazy thing she has planned, whereas Jaxon might actually be a part of her crazy plan. Not exactly a typical selection of heroes, but my mom used to say that beggars can't be choosers, and right now I'm definitely willing to beg if it means I don't become Katmere Academy's first human sacrifice.

"The stars align at twelve seventeen."

I have no idea what that means, but as Lia and I get closer and closer to the altar, I know that I've got very little time to do whatever I'm going to do to stop this madness. Because once she gets me tied down this time, it's game over for sure.

With no other ideas and no other options, I make my legs go weak.

"Walk!" she screeches, but I ignore her as I let my head loll back and my entire body sag. Then, using every ounce of willpower I have left, I close my eyes and make the gamble that she won't kill me right here, right now. And then I drop to the ground, ignoring the searing pain in my scalp as I rip out what I'm sure is a whole handful of hair in the process.

Lia howls in outrage as she loses her grip on me.

The sound bounces off the ceiling and echoes around the room in a macabre warning that has everything inside me urging me to run, to crawl, to put as much distance between her and me as I can possibly manage. Even the voice inside me is screaming to get up, to get moving.

But even on my best day, Lia's ten times faster than I am and twenty times stronger. Outrunning her isn't an option even if I could move faster than the sad, pathetic crawl I'm currently limited to.

So instead of running, I play possum. Not running, not moving, not even breathing as she screams at me to get up. When screaming doesn't work, she tries slapping my face a few times. And when that doesn't work, she hauls me up herself, throws me over her shoulder and starts stumbling toward the altar with my head hanging halfway down her back.

That alone tells me she's in a lot worse shape than she let on. Flint obviously did more damage than I gave him credit for. Good for him.

My injured shoulder is screaming at me in this position, but

I ignore it even as I give myself permission to open my eyes for a second.

Everything looks exactly as it did when I ran from this place, including the jar of blood that's still knocked over on its side. Lia steps around the glass containers and carries me past a stone lectern that has a book spread wide open on it. I have just enough time to wonder if it's the same book she was reading from in the library all those days ago, when I have to close my eyes again and play dead—or at least unconscious—as she dumps me on the altar.

This is the best—the only—chance I'm going to have to get myself free, so I wait until she turns her back on me and starts trying to untie the knot on one of the hand restraints. Then I grab her hair and throw every ounce of my weight behind it as I push her forward and slam her head against the edge of the altar as hard as I can.

Lia howls like a banshee.

And since she doesn't immediately strike out in revenge, I pull her head back and do it again, even harder this time. Then I scramble backward as fast as my bruised and battered body can carry me.

I don't get far before she whirls on me with a growl worthy of a big cat episode on Animal Planet. It doesn't stop me, though. Just makes me push harder through the pain. This time I'm not running for the door, though. Instead, I head straight toward the lectern—and the book Lia has resting on top of it.

It takes her a second to realize what I'm going for, but when she does, she lets loose a scream like nothing I've ever heard before. And then she leaps after me, clearing the altar with a single bound and landing right next to the lectern. But she's too late.

I'm already there.

I grab the book, rip out the pages she's got it open to—plus

a couple on either side just to be safe. Then nearly cry in relief when Lia completely loses her shit.

She screams and lunges for me, but I use the last drop of strength in my body to jump backward even as I tear the pieces in half.

She's on me in seconds, her claws and teeth tearing at me in a desperate effort to get her hands on what I'm pretty sure is some ancient spell. "Give it to me!" she screams as she rakes her fingers down my biceps. "Give it to me now!"

I hold on as tightly as I can, even as new blood flows down my arms. Then I do the only thing I can do to keep the paper out of her reach. I roll the both of us straight off the altar to the hard stone ground several feet below.

We land with a *thud*. Lia barely seems to notice the drop, but I'm half convinced the landing dislocated my shoulder all over again...and maybe even broke my back. Still, I've got one shot at foiling her plan—whatever the fuck it is beyond killing me as painfully as possible, so I ignore the pain as best I can and reach my hand out to one of the hundreds of candles burning around us.

And plunge the spell straight into the fire.

Sticks and Stones May Break Your Bones, but Vampires Will Kill You

The dry, ancient paper instantly goes up in flames, and the sound Lia makes as we watch is like nothing I've ever heard before. Crazed, desperate, inhuman, it chills me to the bone.

It also brings to light what I've known all along—that what little time I had left is now used up. And there's nothing more I can do about it.

Lia dives for the paper, grabs the remnants of it despite the flames currently devouring it. Her skin sizzles at the contact, but it's too late. Anything useful is already gone.

She whirls on me with a snarl. "I'm going to enjoy ripping the flesh from your bones."

"I have no doubt."

The voice inside me wants me to get up, to run, but I've got nothing left. I'm battered, broken, and without my parents—without Jaxon—to run to, I can't figure out why I'm fighting so hard anyway. I've foiled her plan, kept her from doing whatever it is she murdered my parents to do.

It will have to be enough.

She's on me in seconds, and I wait for the kill shot, for new waves of agony to roll over me. But instead of ripping me to pieces as I expect, she lifts me into her arms. Throws me back onto the altar.

"Do you think I need that book?" she demands, dragging me to the center of the stone slab. "I've spent months preparing for this. Months!" she screeches as she reaches down and tears a long strip of cotton from the shift I'm wearing. "I know every word, every syllable of what's on that page."

She throws herself down on top of me and grabs my left arm. It's my turn to scream as she wrenches it above my head.

She just laughs as she ties me to the metal ring I was tied to before and sneers. "Payback's a bitch."

She rips another strip from my gown, and though I kick at her, we both know it's not going to do any good. She doesn't even bother to slap me back. Just shifts her weight so she can tie my right arm up as well.

"I spent months searching for you," she tells me as she climbs to her feet. "And then after I found you, I spent weeks planning your parents' accident and planting the seeds with Finn that would get you here. Then more weeks making sure Jaxon was ready for you. And now you think you can ruin everything by burning a little spell? You have no idea."

She staggers back toward the lectern, grabs the book from where it fell onto the floor. "You have no idea!" she screams again, brandishing the book like a weapon. "This is my one chance, my one chance, to bring him back, and you think I'm going to let you ruin it? You? You pathetic, miserable excuse for a..."

"Human?" I interject, even as my mind runs wild at what she's suggesting. Bring him back? Who? Hudson?

"Is that what you think you are? Human?" She laughs. "God, you're even more pathetic than I thought. You think I would do all this to get my hands on a human? One trip to town and I

could have a hundred of them without even trying."

I have no idea what she means, or even if she's telling me the truth. And still her words go through me like lightning. Still they wake up something inside me that I don't recognize but somehow feels the slightest bit familiar. Am I a witch after all, despite what Uncle Finn said? Is that what this voice I keep hearing inside me means?

And if I am, so what? There are more than a hundred witches at this school alone. What makes me so special? The fact that she thinks I'm Jaxon's mate? Or something else? Something more?

There's no time to dwell on the whole mess right now, not if she's being honest about knowing the spell. And not while the clock is ticking inexorably toward twelve seventeen. "Are you seriously trying to bring Hudson back?" I ask, and though I know Lia's crazy and that she plans to kill me, there's still a tiny piece of me that might actually feel sorry for her...or it would, if she hadn't also been responsible for the murder of my parents.

The fact that it's Hudson's death that did this to her, that made her so lost and broken that she came up with this ridiculous, convoluted scheme to bring him back...it's pathetic and heartwrenching all at the same time.

But still, there's no way Lia can be allowed to bring Hudson back. Not if one-tenth of what Jaxon told me about him was true—and I know that it was. No wonder Flint and the other shifters were so adamant about doing whatever they had to to stop Lia, even if it meant killing me. But they were insane to think Jaxon would ever play a part in this. There's no way he would ever try to bring his brother back. No freaking way.

Knowing this makes me feel horrible for doubting him.

"You can't do this, Lia."

"I'm going to do it. I'm *going* to bring Hudson back," she answers. "And *you're* going to help me."

"It's impossible, Lia. You can kill as many people as you want, find as many spells as you think necessary. But you can't bring the boy you love back from the dead. It doesn't work that way."

"Don't talk to me about what I can or can't do," she snarls, even as she pulls out her phone and holds it out to me so I can see the time. "In five minutes, you'll know the truth. Everyone will."

I really hope that isn't true. I read *Frankenstein* last year—I can only imagine what abomination she'll bring back from the dead if her little plan actually works.

Before I can say anything, though, the main doors to the room rattle on their hinges. Seconds later, the whole wall shakes, but the stones stay in place. As do the doors.

"He's getting close," Lia says, crawling to the edge of the altar and pushing to her feet.

"Who? Hudson?" I ask, shivers of horror sliding down my spine at the thought of a resurrected vampire breaking through those doors—and then doing God only knows what? Feeding from me because of whatever Lia thinks I am?

"Jaxon," she answers me. "He's been out there for a while, trying to find a way to get to you."

Jaxon. Jaxon is out there. For the first time since I woke up strapped to this damn altar, I feel like there might be a chance to stop Lia. And to save my life. "How do you know?" The question escapes before I even know I'm going to ask it.

"Because I can feel him. He's desperate to get to you. But no vampire can enter a room he isn't invited into—even the most powerful vampire in existence. If he wants in here, he'll have to use more power than he even knows he has." She laughs, and this time there's no hiding the crazy in it.

"I hope he's suffering. I hope he knows what's happening to you in here and that it's killing him that he can't get to you. I can't wait for you to serve your purpose so you can die and finally, he'll know just how excruciating it feels to lose a mate."

It turns out that even in the middle of all this, I can still be shocked. "You're wrong, Lia. I'm not—I'm not Jaxon's mate. I don't even know what that means, but I'm sure if it were a thing Jaxon or Macy would have told me."

"It's cute that you believe that. But it doesn't matter what you think. What matters right now is that it's true. And that *he* believes it." She shrugs. "Then again, he also believes he can get around thousands of years of safeguards and break down these doors to get to you. So he could very well be delusional. Who knows?" She shrugs. "And who cares? As long as he suffers when you die, I don't care what he believes."

As if on cue, the door rattles, its hinges screaming at the pressure brought to bear on them by Jaxon's powers. "Jaxon!" I scream his name, desperate for him to hear me.

The rattling of the doors stops for just a second. "Grace! Hold on! I'm almost in!" The door shakes so much that the rocks around it start to crumble.

"Come in! You're invited in! Please! Come in, come in, come in!" I shout the words loud enough for him to hear them.

Lia just laughs. "Not your room, Grace. Not your invitation to issue. Sorry to burst your bubble."

The alarm on her phone goes off before I can respond, and suddenly she's all business. "It's time." Raising her arms above her head, she begins to chant, her voice low and rhythmic and strong, so strong.

She doesn't falter at all, doesn't stumble over words even though the written spell is long gone. Looks like she wasn't lying when she said she'd been practicing for months. Which means I really did throw myself off this altar for nothing.

My shoulder is *not* impressed.

I mean, logically, I know this isn't going to work. There's

no way she's going to be able to bring Hudson back from the dead—life just doesn't work like that. Believe me, I know.

But I'm not going to lie, when a breeze sweeps over me out of nowhere, ruffling my hair and brushing against my skin, it chills me to the bone. As does the sudden electricity in the air that follows it.

Every hair on my body stands straight up in response. Combined with Lia's odd chanting that's only getting odder, it's more than enough to have me screaming for Jaxon like the hounds of hell are after us.

He bellows in response, a primal sound from deep inside him that has me yanking on the ties around my wrists as hard as I can. It hurts—ohmygod does it hurt—but the pain doesn't matter. Nothing matters right now but stopping Lia and getting to Jaxon.

This time the whole wall shudders under the force of Jaxon's power. I'm facing away from the door, but I can hear the grinding of stones being pulled loose and the crash of them as they hit the floor. He's close now, so close, and everything inside me strains toward him and away from Lia's madness.

I can't believe I let Flint get inside my head, can't believe I thought even for a second that Lia and Jaxon were working together. And I definitely can't believe I ran from the only boy I've ever loved. Jaxon would never be involved in something like this. Especially if that something aimed to hurt me. I know that now.

Plus, how could I forget just how much Lia hates Jaxon? No way would she bring him in to her own personal Project Lazarus.

I really am a fool. And it's going to be the death of me.

Lia's chant grows louder, echoing throughout the cavernous room as she grabs a long, ceremonial knife from inside the lectern. I watch in horror as she slices open her wrist and lets her blood drip onto the altar. It sizzles as it hits the stone, where it turns into a noxious black smoke. The wind picks up, starts churning the smoke into a kind of mini-tornado that has me pulling against my bindings as hard as I can even as I scream for Jaxon.

I'm beginning to think there just might be something to this raising Hudson from the dead thing. And if there is, I want absolutely no freaking part of it. I sure as hell don't want to be the catalyst that brings everything together.

Lia obviously has other plans, though, because she walks toward me with the knife. Her blood is still gleaming on the blade and I have an *oh God*, *please let her clean it off before she touches me with it* moment. Which seems absurd considering: One, shouldn't I be praying that she doesn't come near me with it at all? And two, what does it matter when I'm already covered in her blood, my blood, and some stranger's blood? What's a little more at this point?

Still I shrink back, pulling my legs up and trying to curl into a ball as best I can. It's not much protection—or really any protection—but it's all I've got until Jaxon manages to break through the ancient safeguards.

I expect Lia to start hacking at me with the knife as soon as she gets to me, but instead, she stands above me—arms spread wide and knife pointed directly at my midsection.

Not cut, then. Stabbed. Awesome.

I brace myself for more pain, but the knife never descends. Instead, the black smoke surrounds us, winding itself tighter and tighter as the breeze picks up and Lia finally stops chanting.

"Open your mouth!" she screams at me as the smoke centers itself directly above me.

No freaking way. She can kill me if she wants to—in fact, at this point she can feel free to do just that—because there is no way I'm opening up and sucking some noxious and terrifying smoke into me that may or may not be Jaxon's dead brother. Not going to happen.

"Grace!" Jaxon yells from the other side of the door. "Grace, are you okay? Hold on! Hold on for me just a little longer."

I don't answer him—doing so would require opening my mouth, and right now I've got my face pressed into my arm and my jaw clenched as tightly as I possibly can. No way is this going down the way Lia seems to think it will.

"Do it, or I'll kill you!" Lia screeches. "Right here, right now."

Like that's going to scare me? I resigned myself to death a while ago, so the threat of dying doesn't hold much weight at the moment—especially since I know she'll kill me once she gets what she wants anyway. So why on earth should I give it to her? Especially when it involves me turning into some kind of bizarre host for an ancient vampiric ritual?

Lia abandons the threats and throws herself on top of me as she tries to pry my mouth open with her fingers.

Don't let her do it, the voice inside me warns. Hold the course. I kind of want to answer it with a resounding no shit, Sherlock, but I'm too busy trying to buck Lia off me.

It's not working—big surprise considering she's a pissed-off vampire with superhuman strength and I'm a human in really, really bad shape. That doesn't mean I'm giving up, though, doesn't mean—

A giant wrenching sound suddenly fills the air. Lia freezes on top of me as stones go flying in every direction. And in walks Jaxon.

"No!" Lia screams as she picks up one of the stones that landed near us and chucks it back at him as hard as she can. "You can't be here! You're not invited in!"

Jaxon deflects the rock with little more than a look. "No wall, no invitation needed." And then he's leaping across the room

in a single bound. He lands next to us on the altar and rips Lia off me, sends her flying across the room.

She hits the wall with a crash but comes right back at him. Jaxon, in the meantime, whispers, "I'm sorry, Grace," as he waves a hand over me. The bindings on my wrists simply fall away. Then he's crouching down next to me, stroking a hand down my face. "I'm so sorry."

"It's not—" My voice breaks as relief sweeps through me. "It's not your fault."

His voice is bitter. "Whose fault is it, then?"

I start to answer, but—big surprise—Lia's not going down without a fight. "Look out!" I scream as she hurtles across the stage straight at Jaxon. He waits for her to get close then uses her own momentum to send her flying off the altar and across the room.

She lands with a sickening crunch of bone, but that doesn't keep her down, either. She staggers to her feet, holds her arms up, and starts that horrible chant again. The black smoke responds, circling Jaxon, circling me, cutting off our view of Lia and the rest of the room.

"What's happening?" Jaxon demands.

I don't answer him now that the smoke is right next to me again, too scared of opening my mouth to so much as make a sound.

Jaxon uses his powers to try to move the smoke away from us, but it must be the one thing in the universe not under his control. Because instead of clearing out, it winds itself more and more tightly around us, until I can barely see Jaxon, let alone the rest of the room.

Which, apparently, is Lia's plan, because as soon as Jaxon turns his back in search of an escape, Lia is on him. She leaps onto his back with a primal kind of war cry and plunges the knife

straight into Jaxon's chest.

It's my turn to scream—or as close to a scream as I can get with my jaw clamped shut. I try to get to him, but Jaxon throws a hand out, uses his telekinesis to keep me where I am. Then he reaches down and yanks the knife out of his chest.

It falls to the ground with a clatter.

Blood is steadily leaking out of his wound, but Jaxon doesn't seem to even notice. He's too focused on Lia. Reaching over his shoulder, he grabs Lia by the collar and pulls her over his head and onto the ground at his feet.

I expect him to use his powers on her now, but instead he plunges his hand down, aiming straight at her chest. She rolls away at the last second, tries to kick him in the face. But he grabs onto her leg and twists it, fast and hard.

A sickening crunch fills the air, followed by Lia's howls of pain. Jaxon grabs on to her hair, prepares to break her neck and put all of us out of our misery, but before he can do it, the black smoke circles his neck and starts to choke him.

He claws at his neck, tries to get it away from his throat, but it's not letting go no matter how hard he wrestles with it.

Somehow, Lia is on her feet again. Her left leg is bent at an unnatural angle, but she's standing, arms raised as she starts that horrible chanting again. The spell only seems to make the smoke stronger as it continues to strangle Jaxon.

He's sheet white as he falls to his knees and tries to wrestle with something he can't get an actual grip on. Blood continues to seep out of his chest wound, and I know if I don't do something, Jaxon is going to die right in front of me.

I can't let that happen.

I crawl forward, hands stretched out in front of me as I search for— My fingers come across the cold steel of Lia's ceremonial knife, and I grab onto it with all of my waning strength.

It's sharp and it cuts me, but I barely feel the pain as I push myself up off the floor. And swing the knife at Lia's chest with every ounce of strength I have left in my body.

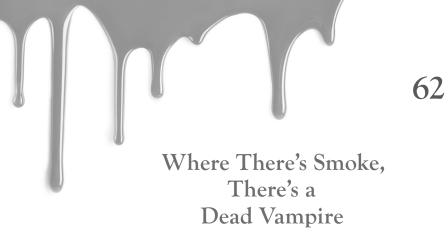
She's wide open, her arms spread out to the sides, so I connect. The knife makes a sickening squishing sound as it sinks through skin and flesh to the organs below.

She doesn't scream this time. Instead, she rears back with a strange gargle-gasp and falls straight backward onto the floor.

The horrifying rattle coming from her chest tells me I punctured a lung instead of her heart, but at this point I don't actually care. As long as she's out of commission, I'm good. Or I will be as soon as we figure out how to get the greasy black smoke off Jaxon, who honestly isn't looking much better than Lia at the moment.

If he's not strong enough to pry it off—with or without his telekinesis—I know I've got no shot. So I do the only thing I can think of, the only thing guaranteed to get the smoke to let him go.

I open my mouth and take a long, slow breath.



It takes a few seconds, but the smoke—or whatever that thing is—finally catches on. It relinquishes its hold on Jaxon and arrows straight for me.

Which, gotta say, is probably the most terrifyingly awful thing that's ever happened to me in my life.

But considering the alternative is standing around and watching another person I love die, there is no alternative. And so I open my arms and gather the smoke toward me. Once it's surrounding me, I take a breath, start to suck it in.

"No!" Jaxon roars.

Suddenly, I'm falling backward, *flying* backward off the altar and halfway across the room while Jaxon stumbles to his feet. He's nearly gray at this point, but he manages to stand tall as he holds his hands out in front of him. Then slowly, slowly—so slowly I think I may have a heart attack watching him—he starts to compress the air between his hands into a spherical shape.

As he does, the entire room—the entire tunnel—starts to shake. And then it starts to crumble around us.

And still, Jaxon doesn't let up. Still, he continues to compress the sphere, his hands slowly rotating in a circle as he pulls more and more energy, more and more mass into the sphere.

The smoke flattens itself out, starts streaming in the other direction, but Jaxon is having none of it. He just starts pulling harder, until stones and candles and vases filled with blood start flying across the room toward him. He takes it all, pulls it all into the sphere and then reaches for more, until even the air in the room is streaming toward him in what looks and feels an awful lot like a tornado. And with the air comes the smoke, no matter how hard it struggles against Jaxon's power.

It's getting harder to breathe as Jaxon absorbs more and more of the oxygen in the room, but I don't even care. I just drop to the floor the way they taught me in fire safety and try to breathe whatever's left down here as I watch him draw the smoke inexorably closer to him. Closer and closer and closer.

Soon even Lia and I are caught up in the energy suck, getting dragged across the floor by Jaxon's power and his indomitable will. I don't try to fight it, don't do anything that might possibly make this harder for him. Instead, I just give myself over to Jaxon and trust that somehow he will keep me safe, even from himself.

He always does.

He's got the smoke in his grasp now, floating between his hands as he struggles to condense it, to break it down into whatever he needs it to be so that the vortex or whatever he's got going on in there can absorb it.

But the smoke isn't going down without a fight. Every time it looks like Jaxon might have it contained, a small stream escapes his hold and he has to start all over again. But Jaxon has a will of iron and more power than I even imagined possible inside of him. He won't give up.

Instead, he spins the sphere between his palms faster and faster. The ceiling starts caving in, the walls fall to pieces, even the stones on the floor start to crumble. And still Jaxon doesn't

relinquish his hold. Still, he continues to pull.

The oxygen in the room is getting thinner, and I'm really struggling for breath now. He must be, too, but you wouldn't know it from the way he continues to manipulate every single thing in the room.

The smoke struggles to escape one more time, but with a roar, Jaxon yanks it back inside the sphere once and for all. And then he just shuts it down, just turns off the conduit or the energy suck or whatever it is so that everything around us just settles.

The room stops shaking, the walls and ceiling and floor stop breaking apart, the remaining candles drop to the floor, and the oxygen slowly starts to stabilize. I settle back against the ground and just breathe for a few seconds, even as I watch Jaxon condense the sphere between his hands into a glowing orb only a little larger than a tennis ball.

And then he pulls his hand back and fires it straight at Lia.

It hits her in the stomach, and her whole body arches off the floor. She gives one last terrifying gasp as she absorbs the energy, the matter, the smoke. Then she looks straight at him and whispers, "Yes. Finally. Thank you."

Seconds later she explodes into a cloud of dust that slowly settles back onto the ground.

All I can think is that it's over. Oh my God, it's finally over.

"Jaxon!" I turn to him, try to crawl toward the only boy I've ever loved. But I'm weak, so weak, and the altar is too far away. Instead, I hold a hand out to him instead and call his name over and over and over again.

Jaxon staggers across the altar toward me, then half jumps, half falls off of it to the ground below, where I'm waiting for him.

He takes my hand, brings it to his lips. And whispers, "I'm so sorry," before falling into a dead faint at my feet.

"Jaxon!" Frantically, I call his name. "Jaxon, wake up! Jaxon!"

He doesn't move, and for one, terrifying second I'm not even sure he's breathing.

Somehow I find the strength to roll him over. I press a hand to his chest, feel the shallow movement of his chest up and down, and nearly sob in relief. But there's no time for that, not when he's still bleeding out from the chest wound Lia gave him. And not when he's turned a pasty, sickly white.

"I've got you," I whisper to him as I grab on to one of the ragged strips Lia actually left on my shift and rip it off. I ball it up, press it firmly to Jaxon's wound in an effort to staunch the blood. "I've got you."

Except I don't have him. Not really. Not when he could die on me at any second. He's lost so much blood—more than I have at this point—but I don't know what to do about it. If I leave him and go for help, he might very well bleed out while I'm gone. If I don't, he may bleed out anyway, since I can't seem to staunch the blood.

Desperate, I look around for any untouched jars of the blood Lia had lined up around the altar earlier today. But they're all gone now, sucked into Jaxon's vortex or spilled onto the floor around us.

"What do I do? What do I do?" I mutter to myself as I try to get my panic-stricken and pain-addled brain to work. Jaxon's heart rate is slowing down and so is his breathing. I don't have much time to do something, anything to save him.

In the end, I do the only thing I can think of. The only thing I can do in this situation. I claw open one of the wounds on my wrists until it starts to bleed freely again. And then I press my wrist to his mouth and whisper, "Drink."

At first there's no response as my blood drips onto Jaxon's lips. Seconds go by, maybe a full minute, and I'm beginning to despair. If he doesn't drink, he'll die. If he doesn't drink, we'll both—

He regains consciousness with a roar. Then his hands are gripping my arm like a vise as he bites down right over my vein. And sucks and sucks and sucks.

It feels nothing—and everything—like it usually does when he drinks from me. There's pleasure, yes, but also a lot of pain as he takes in as much of my blood as he can with every swallow. Despite the pain, relief swamps me even as the room around me goes black.

There's no fighting it this time, no need to fight it this time, because I'm not alone. Jaxon's here with me, and that's all that matters. So when the next wave of blackness rises up to swamp me, I don't struggle against it.

Instead, I give myself over to it—and to Jaxon—trusting that somehow everything will be okay.

Trusting that somehow Jaxon will make sure of it.

63

A Bite to Remember

he first thing I notice upon waking up is that I'm warm. Really warm, which feels off for some reason, though I can't quite figure out why. Then again. I can't quite figure out a lot of things as I drift slowly between sleep and wakefulness.

Like what the weird beep I'm hearing is from.

Or why my right arm feels like it's being crushed.

Or why my room smells like apples and cinnamon.

Eventually, it's the second question that brings me to full consciousness, that has me opening up my eyes and shaking out my arm in an effort to get the pain to stop.

The first thing I see when I open my eyes is a woman in a black-and-purple caftan holding a clipboard and reading a little machine next to my bed. The same machine that's making the beeping noise, it turns out. And making my arm hurt, because as soon as she presses a button, the pressure goes away.

Because blood pressure is an actual thing, apparently. And so are IVs, if the needle stuck into the back of my hand and the tube it's attached to are any indication.

It all comes flooding back to me in a rush—Flint, Lia, the fight.

"Jaxon." I push myself up, start looking wildly around the room. "Jaxon! Is he all right? Is he—"

"He's fine, Grace," the woman tells me with a soothing pat on the shoulder. "And so are you, though it was a touch dicey for a minute—with the both of you."

Her words feel an awful lot like déjà vu—then again, a lot of this morning feels like déjà vu. After everything that just happened, it's hard to imagine that it was just a couple of days ago that I found out about vampires. And now, I've helped murder one.

And—please God—helped save one, I remind myself as I scoot down the raised hospital bed until I make it past the guardrails and can actually swing my legs over the edge. "Where is he?" I demand of the short-haired woman standing next to my bed. "I need to make sure..." I stop, because I can't even say the words out loud.

"He really is okay," the nurse assures me, her tone soothing. "In fact, he's right outside your room. I asked him to step out while I took your vitals, but other than when medical personnel request it, he hasn't left your side since he brought you in."

"Can you get him for me?" I ask after licking my dry lips. "I just need a minute with him."

I'm assuming if I'm here, then Jaxon made it out of that hellhole of a dungeon. But emotion is currently outweighing logic, and I just need to see him. Just need to hear his voice and feel his hand—his body—against mine to believe that he actually made it out.

To believe that the nightmare is finally over.

"I'll get him," she tells me. "If you lie back in that bed. Your pulse rate is skyrocketing, and we just got everything stabilized, for heaven's sake."

My pulse is skyrocketing because I'm panicking, I want to

screech at her. Jaxon was nearly dead the last time I saw him.

But I don't screech. Instead, I settle for whispering, "Thank you," as I lean back against the raised head of the bed. My hands are shaking, so I hide them under the covers—no need to broadcast the fact that I already feel exhausted from one little adrenaline spike.

"You're welcome," she answers. "And just so you know what's going on, you're in Katmere Academy's infirmary, where you've been for the last two days. I'm Nurse Alma, and I've been taking care of you along with Marise. Like I said earlier, you're pretty banged up and you lost a lot of blood. Plus you have a dislocated shoulder, so now that you're awake and moving around, Marise will probably be splinting it up for a while. But overall, you're in good health. Jaxon got you here before the blood loss could do any permanent damage. You're going to be fine in a few days."

I know I should care about what she's saying and I will... soon. "What about Jaxon?" I ask anxiously. "He was stabbed. He lost a lot of blood, too. Is he—"

"From what I understand, you took care of him quite well. But let me get him so you can calm down. He can tell you how he is while I call your uncle and let him know you're awake."

I watch anxiously as Alma walks through the door into the hallway. She's speaking softly, so I can't hear what she's saying, but seconds later Jaxon bounds through the door. Alive and reasonably well.

Relief sweeps through me, and I finally feel like I can take a real breath. I mean, yeah, he looks like hell—or at least, as close to hell as someone like him can look—but he's alive. And walking under his own power. That has to count for something.

As he gets closer, I realize his complexion is still a little gray, which makes his scar stand out against his cheek in stark relief. He also seems like he's lost at least five pounds in the two days

I've been asleep. Which is impossible, I know, but he looks so tired and thin and worn out—nothing like the force of nature I'm used to.

"You're awake," he says, and for a second I swear I see tears in his dark eyes. But then he blinks and there's nothing but strength there...and something else I don't even try to interpret. Not when my head is spinning and I can barely keep my eyes open.

"Come here," I tell him, holding my hands out to him. As I look down at them, I notice my wrists are wrapped in gauze and the many cuts on my hands and arms seem to be sealed with a shiny liquid bandage. I'm a mess, but at least I'm a sterilized mess.

He moves closer, but he doesn't sit on the bed. And he doesn't touch me. "I don't want to jostle your shoulder—"

"My shoulder is fine," I tell him, which isn't even a lie right now, courtesy of whatever drugs or herbs or spells Alma currently has going on with me. "So come here. Or I'm coming to you."

I kick the covers down in preparation to do just that, then wince as the motion aggravates my raw ankles—which it turns out are also wrapped. Big surprise.

To be honest, I'm beginning to feel a little like a mummy here. And an unwanted one at that, if Jaxon's reaction to me is any indication.

"Stay where you are," he barks as he takes another couple of steps toward me.

"Then get over here and tell me what's going on," I say. "Because I'm beginning to feel like I've got the plague or something."

"Yeah, that's the problem here. You've got the plague." But at least he takes my outstretched hand this time as he settles himself gingerly on the edge of the bed.

"Don't be snarky," I say as I rest my forehead on his shoulder.
"I did save your life, after all. You should be nice to me."

"Yeah, and I repaid you for that kindness by nearly killing you, so you should want me as far from you as I can get."

I roll my eyes, even as exhaustion threatens to swamp me. "Are you always such a drama queen, or do you just trot it out on special occasions?"

The look of shock on his face is priceless. And so is the snitty tone in his voice when he answers, "I don't think being concerned about you makes me a *drama queen*."

"No, but taking on all the blame for what was obviously Lia's giant head trip, does." I press a couple of kisses to his neck, reveling in the way he can't stop himself from shivering at the first touch of my lips to his skin. "So chill out a little, will you? I'm tired."

His eyebrows disappear under his crazily messed up hair, and I realize it's the first time since I've met him that I've ever seen his hair anything less than perfect. "You want me to chill out?" he repeats.

"I do." I scoot over to make room for him on the bed, biting the inside of my cheek to keep from crying out as I jostle my shoulder in the process. "Now climb on." I pat the bed next to me.

Jaxon looks from my face to the bed and back again, but he doesn't move. Which makes me sigh and say, "Come on. You know you want to."

"I want a lot of things that aren't good for you."

"What a coincidence. So do I, though I'm pretty sure we'll disagree on what's good for me and what isn't."

He sighs. "Grace-"

"Don't." I cut him off. "Please, Jaxon, just don't. Not now, when I'm too tired to argue with you. Do I need to spell it out for you? I need you to hold me."

And just like that, his resistance melts. Instead of arguing, he settles back against the pillows with me and wraps me in his arms, taking care not to bother my injured shoulder.

We lie like that—in silence—for several minutes, and I don't truly relax until he rests his cheek against the top of my head and presses kisses into my hair.

"I'm glad we're okay."

"Yeah." His laugh is harsh. "Me too."

"Don't say it like that," I tell him. "We're lucky."

"You don't look so lucky right now."

"Yeah, well neither do you. But we are." I take a deep breath, let it out slowly. "We could be..." I trail off, unable to say the words.

"Dead, like Lia and Hudson?" Jaxon fills in the blanks for me.

"Yeah. And we're not, so I count that as a win."

He pauses for a minute, but then he nods. Sighs. "Yeah, me too."

"Flint?" I ask after a second.

"You don't want to talk to me about the dragon right now."

"I know," I soothe, running my right hand up and down his arm for comfort.

"He's alive, if that's what you're asking. And currently in better shape than either one of us, though he shouldn't be."

"He thought he was doing the right thing."

"Are you kidding me?" Jaxon jerks away from me, shoots me an incredulous look. "He and his friends tried to kill you on numerous occasions, then he pulled that stunt down in the tunnels that made everything worse, and you think he was just trying to do the right thing?"

"He was, bizarre as it sounds. And I mean, I'm not *happy* with him. But I'm glad he isn't dead."

"Yeah, well, that makes one of us," he mutters as he lies back down against me. "I should have killed him when I had the chance." I hug him as tightly as my injured shoulder will let me. "I think we have enough blood on our hands right now."

"You mean I have enough blood on my hands, don't you?"

"That's not what I said, is it?" It's my turn to push away from him, but only because I want to be looking him in the eye when I say this. "This isn't your fault. It isn't my fault. And it isn't Flint's or the rest of the shifters' faults. It's Lia's fault. She's the one who devised this plan. And she's the one who caused everything that happened." My voice catches in my throat. "Did the shifters tell you? About my parents?"

"Flint told me. He and Cole told Foster and me everything—including why they didn't trust the witches or the vampires with what they knew."

"The vampires because they thought you might all be colluding for God only knows what reason," I guess. "But why not the witches?"

"You aren't a witch, but your family is. They didn't think Foster would be able to see past the fact that you're his niece to the danger having you here at Katmere posed to everyone."

I roll my eyes at him. "Yeah, well, I'm pretty sure the danger here at Katmere has all been *to* me and not *from* me, thank you very much."

"I should have figured it out sooner." Jaxon looks tortured.

"You planning on having that god complex of yours looked at any time soon?" I snark. "Or are we all just supposed to live with it?"

"Wow. You've been awake fifteen minutes and you've called me a drama queen and now accused me of having a god complex." He raises his brows. "You sure you aren't mad at me?"

"I'm sure," I tell him, pulling his face down to mine so I can kiss him.

But he flinches a little when my hand touches his scar, per

usual, and damn it, we've been through too much for this to keep happening. I pull away before our lips so much as brush.

"What's wrong?" He looks wary.

I sigh as I stroke my fingers along his jaw. "I know I have no right to tell you how to feel, but I wish you could see yourself as I do. I wish you could see how gorgeous you are to me. How strong and powerful and awe-inspiring you are."

"Grace." He turns his head, presses a kiss into my palm. "You don't need to say that. I know what I look like."

"But that's just it. You don't!" I reach for him and hold on tight, ignoring the pain that shoots up my arm at the movement. "I know you hate your scar because Hudson gave it to you during the most horrible moments of your life—"

"You're wrong," he interrupts.

I stare at him. "About what?"

"About everything. I don't hate my scar, I'm humiliated by the fact that I let it happen. Hudson didn't give me the scar, the vampire queen did. And the worst moments of my life weren't when I killed Hudson. They were when I finally regained consciousness on that altar and realized I'd taken too much of your blood. That moment—and all the moments it took for me to get you here? Those will *always* be the worst seconds, the *worst* minutes, of my life."

There are so many important things in what he just said that I don't know where to start. Except... "Your mother? Your mother did this to you?" I whisper as horror slithers through me.

He shrugs. "When I killed Hudson, I interfered with her plans. I needed to be punished."

"By tearing up your face?"

"It's hard to scar a vampire—we heal too quickly. By doing this, and ensuring I didn't heal, she left a mark of weakness on me for the whole world to see." "But you could have stopped her anytime. Why didn't you?"

"I wasn't going to fight my mother, and I certainly wasn't going to hurt her any more than I already had." He shrugs again. "Besides, she needed someone to punish for what happened, someone to hurt so that she could feel better. Better me than someone who bore no responsibility for what happened."

I can't keep the horror from my face, but Jaxon just laughs a little. "Don't worry about it, Grace. It's all good."

"It's not all good." I do my best to swallow the rage that's swelling inside me. "That woman is a monster. She's evil. She's ..."

"The vampire queen." He fills in the blank for me. "And there's nothing any of us can do about it. But thank you." It's his turn to whisper as his lips brush over my hair.

"For what?" I nearly choke on the words.

"For caring." He lowers his head for a kiss.

But our lips barely have a chance to brush before there's a knock on the open door. "Sorry to interrupt," Marise says as she sticks her head in the doorway. "But now that you're awake, I want to check out my favorite patient."

I glance around the empty bay. "Your only patient, don't you mean?"

"Yeah, well, you give me a lot of business. Plus, I had Jaxon and Flint in here for at least a day. You just require a little extra attention, that's all." She grins at me.

"Yeah, well, the whole being human thing really bites around here." Deep inside me, the voice wakes up. Whispers that I shouldn't be so fast to call myself human. Which is laughable, except...except Lia's words haunt me, about how much trouble she had to go through to find me and get me here.

Which leaves me with the question of why am I so special? Even if I am a witch—and I'm not sure I am—there are a lot of witches in this school to choose from. Is it because I really

am Jaxon's mate? And if I am, what does that even mean in his world? But how would she know that? And why would that matter anyway? What does who Jaxon loves have to do with raising Hudson from the dead?

Now that Lia is gone and her plan foiled, I have even more questions than I did before she died. I want to ask Jaxon if he has any of the answers, but now isn't the time to think about it, not with Marise flashing her fangs as she quips, "That's not the only thing that bites around here."

"So I've learned," I answer with a smirk.

It only takes a few minutes for her to look me over, and her prognosis is pretty much what Alma already told me. A lot of cuts and bruises that it turns out Alma—who is a healing witch—has already put a lot of effort into minimizing. And a half-healed dislocated shoulder that will need to be splinted for a couple of weeks to finish what Alma already started.

There's also the little matter of the blood transfusion, a little more than two liters, which I really wish she hadn't mentioned in front of Jaxon. But all in all, I'm in good health and will probably get to go back to my dorm room in a couple of days, if my vitals stay steady.

Or so Marise says as she exits with a little wave.

"It's not your fault!" I tell Jaxon the second she's out the door.

"It's entirely my fault," he answers. "I nearly drained you."

"Two liters is nowhere close to draining me."

"It's close to emptying you out enough that you die. Which counts as draining to me." He shakes his head. "I'm so sorry, Grace. About hurting you. About your parents. About everything."

"You didn't hurt me. You saved me. Alma said you got me here before any permanent damage could be done."

He doesn't answer, just kind of shakes his head as his jaw works furiously.

"I gave you my blood, because you were going to die without it." I take his face in my hands and look him straight in the eye so he can see that I mean what I'm saying. "And the truth is, it wasn't a sacrifice. It was as selfish as I could get, because now that I've found you, I'm not okay with being in a world where you don't exist."

For long seconds, he still doesn't say anything. Then he shakes his head, swears. "What am I supposed to say to that, Grace?"

"Say you believe me. Say you know it's not your fault. Say—"
"I love you."

I gasp, then let out a slow, shuddering breath as tears I don't even try to hide bloom in my eyes. "Or you could say that. You could very definitely say that."

"It's true," he whispers. "I'm so in love with you."

"Good, because I'm in love with you, too. And now that Lia's evil plan is forever over, we can try being in love when someone isn't trying to kill us."

He stiffens, looks away, and the cold I thought I'd finally managed to escape skitters down my spine once more.

"What's going on, Jaxon?"

"I don't—" He breaks off, shakes his head. "I don't think we can do this. Grace."

At his words, the cold congeals, turns my body to ice. "What do you mean?" I whisper. "You just said you love me."

"I do love you," he answers forcefully. "But sometimes love isn't enough."

"I don't even know what that means." It's my turn to glance away, my turn to look anywhere but at him.

"Yeah, you do."

I wait for Jaxon to say more, but he doesn't. He just sits on the bed next to me, arm wrapped around my shoulder, body snuggled up against mine even as he rips my heart out of my freaking chest.

"It won't always be like this," I finally whisper to him.

"That's where you're wrong. It's *always* going to be like this. The fact that I love you means you're always going to be a target. You're always going to be in danger."

"That's not what this was about." I turn to him, tangling desperate fingers in his sweater as I tell him, "You know that. You were just a complication—Lia said she wanted me. She said it was about me. Even the shifters were after me because they knew she wanted to use me to..." I trail off, more than happy not to mention Hudson's name to Jaxon ever again.

"You don't really think the shifters are going to let this go, do you? Now that Lia's gone, they may not want to kill you at the moment, but that doesn't mean they won't reconsider the first time I—or my family—piss them off. Now that they know how important you are to me, you're more at risk than you've ever been."

Maybe his fears make sense, maybe they don't. But the truth is, "I don't care."

"I care, Grace." His gaze is shuttered, but it isn't blank. Not this time. I can see the pain in its depths, see that saying these things is hurting him as much as it's hurting me.

It's enough to have me sliding my hands up to his face, enough to have me cupping his cheeks in my palms as I stare deep into those eyes that have captivated me from the very first moment I saw him.

"Yeah, well, you're not the only one in this relationship," I tell him as I lean forward and press soft, desperate kisses to his forehead, the corners of his mouth, his lips. "And that means you don't get to make all the decisions for us."

"Please don't make this any more difficult." He grabs hold of

my hands where they still cover his cheeks, his fingers twining with mine even as he takes care not to hurt me. "I can't walk away if you make it difficult."

"Then don't walk away," I implore, my mouth so close to his that I can feel the heat of his breath on my skin. So close that I can see the tiny silver flecks swirling in his eyes. "Don't turn your back on this—on me—before we even have a chance to try."

He drops his forehead to mine, closes his eyes with an agonized groan. "I don't want to hurt you, Grace."

"So don't."

"It's not that simple—"

"Yes, it is. It is exactly that simple. Either you want to be with me or you don't."

His laugh is dark, tortured. "Of course I want to be with you."

"So be with me, Jaxon." I wrap my arms—IV cord and all—around him, hold him as close to my battered, desperate heart as I can manage. "Be with me. *Love me*. Let me love you."

For long seconds Jaxon doesn't move, doesn't answer, doesn't even breathe as despair and hope battle deep within me. But then, just as I'm about to give up, he takes a deep breath, shudders against me.

And then his hands are on my face and he's kissing me like I'm the most important thing in the world.

I kiss him back the same way, and nothing has ever felt so good. Because for right now, for this moment, everything is finally exactly how it should be.



"No." Jaxon looks at me like I'm from another planet.
I cuddle closer, bat my eyes like a windmill on high.
"Pleeeeeeeeease?"

He lifts a brow. "Do you have something in your eye, or should I call the nurse because you're having a seizure?"

"Ugh. You suck." I cross my arms over my chest and pretend to pout. But after three days of being cooped up in my bedroom, recuperating, I'm not sure how much of it is actually pretending. And even though I know I won't be here forever, it's still awful. "Please, Jaxon? If I have to stare at these walls any longer, I'm going to freak out."

Jaxon sighs, but I can tell he's deliberating, so I push my luck. "Can't we go somewhere? Just for a little while? You can even carry me if I get too tired." I try the whole *eye batting* thing again, less *panicked bird* this time and more *femme fatale*. Or, at least, that's what I'm going for.

"Yeah, like I'm going to fall for that," he says with a snort.

Which, okay. He has a point. I'm not real keen on him carrying me anywhere, especially now that things have calmed

down around here. But still, the boredom is real...and getting more real every moment. "Come on, Jaxon. I know you're just following directions because Marise said I'm supposed to rest for a couple more days, but I'm not planning on joining the Iditarod. I just want to walk around for a few minutes. No big deal."

He studies my face for a minute and must figure out what I've already decided—that I'm going out with or without him—because he nods reluctantly. Then stands up from where we've been stretched out on my bed for the last two hours.

"Civil twilight has set in, so I'll take you outside for a little while," he says eventually. "But not far from the castle. And you have to promise to tell me as soon as you start to get tired."

"I will. I swear!" Excitement races through me, and I spring up after him, then kind of wish I hadn't, considering my *everything* hurts, especially my recently dislocated shoulder. Now that they've set it, it's a lot better than it was, but it still aches a lot. Not that I'm about to tell Jaxon that—partly because he might change his mind and partly because I know he blames himself for everything that happened with Lia.

Which is ridiculous, but Jaxon is totally the guy who balances the whole world on his shoulders and who takes the responsibility of that seriously, even if he never asked for it. So no way am I going to let him see how sore and battered I still feel. Not when that means giving him something else to beat himself up over.

"So what do you want to do?" I ask in an effort to distract him from the fact that I'm limping more than a little.

He's watching me with narrowed eyes and an expression that says I'm not fooling him. But he doesn't say anything else, except, "I've got a couple of ideas. Why don't you get dressed and I'll run and find a few things? I'll be back in fifteen minutes."

"We can meet downstairs—" I start but break off when he

looks at me with both brows lifted. "Oooor we can meet here," I finish.

"Yeah, let's do that." He leans down and drops a kiss on my lips.

It's meant to be quick, but I can't help wrapping my good arm around his neck and pressing myself against him as I deepen the kiss.

Jaxon goes still, but there's a hitch in his breathing that tells me I've got him. Seconds later, he slides his hands down to my hips to pull me even closer. And then he scrapes a fang across my lower lip in a move he knows makes every muscle in my body go weak.

My breath catches in my throat as I open for him. As I press even closer. As I give myself up to Jaxon and the explosion of heat and joy and light that he sets off inside me with just a kiss. Just a touch. Just a look.

I don't know how long we kiss for.

Long enough for my breathing to grow ragged.

Long enough for my knees to tremble with each stroke of his fingers against my hip.

More than long enough for me to reconsider our walk outside now that things inside have gotten so much more interesting.

But eventually Jaxon pulls away with a groan. He drops his forehead against mine, and we just breathe for a while. But then he pulls away, and in a voice gone deep and growly and oh so sexy, he says, "Get dressed. I'll be back in a few."

And then, like always, he's gone between one blink and the next.

It takes me a little longer to recover. A full minute or so passes before my heart rate steadies and my weak knees feel strong enough to support me. Eventually, I get my act together and start getting dressed in the layers upon layers necessary to

survive an hour outside in Alaska. My lips tingle the whole time.

Turns out, it's a good thing I hurried, because Jaxon is back, knocking on my door and letting himself in before I even have my socks on. To be fair, getting dressed takes a lot longer with a dislocated shoulder, but still. Even if I was completely healed, it'd still be impossible for me to compete with Jaxon's speed.

He's carrying a backpack, which he drops by the door when he sees me struggling to pull on my socks.

"Here, give them to me," he says, kneeling down in front of me and gently resting my ankle on his thigh.

And just like that, my breath catches in my throat again. Because if I've learned nothing else in the time I've been here, it's that Jaxon Vega kneels for no one. Yet here he is, kneeling in front of me like it's the most natural thing in the world.

"What?" he asks as he slides the socks over my feet and past my ankles.

I just shake my head because what else is there for me to say? Especially when his fingertips linger on my calf, tracing patterns into my suddenly oversensitive skin.

I must look as flustered as I feel, because he just kind of grins at me as he slides a second sock over the first before doing the same to my other foot.

I shake my head, look away before I end up melting into an actual puddle.

A couple of minutes later, after putting my boots on for me, too, Jaxon stands up and holds a hand out to pull me up.

"Have you decided where we're going?" I ask as we head for the door.

He picks up the backpack—something I've never seen him carry if he's not going to class—and says, "Yeah."

I wait for him to elaborate, but this is Jaxon. He almost never shares more than he has to. Then again, as he gives me a wicked grin, I find myself not minding too much. If Jaxon wants to surprise me, who am I to say no? Especially when his surprises are usually so, so good.

We walk hand in hand through the halls and down the three flights of stairs to the front door. Almost everyone else is in the last class of the day—Jaxon should be, too, but he's ditching—so the common areas are nearly deserted. Which works for me. I'm still not ready to face most of them after everything that has happened.

"Are you okay?" Jaxon asks as we head out into the cold—and down even more steps. Which is great. I mean, it's not like every muscle in my body aches or anything...

Still, I nod, both because I don't want him to know that I'm hurting and because the biting cold kind of takes me by surprise. Which sounds ridiculous—this is Alaska; I know exactly how cold it is outside. But it's still a shock to my system every single time.

I must not be hiding it as well as I'd hoped, because Jaxon takes one look at my face and says, "We could go back in."

"No. I want to do something with you. Just the two of us."

His eyes widen at my words, and the guarded look in his eyes drops away. For a second, just a second, I get to see the real Jaxon—a little awkward, a little vulnerable, a lot in love with me—and it takes my breath away all over again. Because I feel all of that and so much more around him.

"Then let's go."

We set out in the opposite direction that I went on my walk around the grounds that first day. Instead of going by the classroom cottages, we head across the pristine snow to the forest that takes up a lot of the school grounds.

We walk slowly, partly because the cold isn't that bad once I start moving and partly because walking in snow really isn't easy, especially when you were beaten half to death less than a week before. Eventually, though, we get to a little clearing in the forest. It's not very big—maybe the size of my and Macy's dorm room—but there are a couple of benches to the side.

Jaxon drops his backpack on one and pulls out a tall black thermos. He takes off the cup at the top, then opens it and pours something into the cup. Then he hands it to me with a grin.

"Hot chocolate?" I exclaim, delighted.

"Yeah, well, I figure you might want to lay off tea for a while."

I laugh. "You make a good point." I start to take a sip, but Jaxon stops me. Then he reaches into his backpack and pulls out a small bag of marshmallows.

"I don't know much about drinking hot cocoa, but I do know that it usually needs marshmallows." He pulls out a few of the small, homemade-looking squares and scatters them in my cup.

And I swear my heart nearly bursts, right here in the middle of a bunch of trees, as darkness slowly descends around us. Because even after everything we've been through, I'm still blown away by how Jaxon always thinks about me. About what I might like or what makes me feel good or what would make me happy. And he's always, always right.

I take a big sip of the cocoa and am not surprised at all that it's the best hot chocolate I've ever had. "So who did you talk into making this for you?" I ask, eyeing him over the rim of my cup.

He gives me a blank look. "I have no idea what you're talking about." But there's a shadow of amusement in the depths of his eyes that belies his words and makes me laugh.

"Well, whoever it is, please tell them it's really good."

He smirks a little. "I'll do that."

I take another sip, then hold the cup out to him. "Want some?"

"Thanks, but it's not really my thing." Now he's full-on grinning.

"Oh, right." Which makes a million of the questions I've been accumulating for days rush back into my head. "How does that work, anyway?"

He lifts a brow. "How does what work?"

"I saw you drink tea, but you don't drink cocoa. You ate a strawberry during the party, but I've never seen you eat anything else. Except..." I trail off, blushing.

"Except your blood?" he asks archly.

"Well, yeah."

"Vampires drink water just like every other mammal on the planet, and tea is basically hot water. You start adding in milk and chocolate and it's a different story."

"Oh. Yeah." That makes sense. "And the strawberry?"

"Yeah, that was totally for show. My stomach hurt for the rest of the night." It's his turn to look embarrassed.

"Really? So why'd you do it?"

"Honestly?" He shakes his head, looks away. "I have no idea."

It's not the answer I was expecting, but looking at him, it's obvious that he's telling the truth. So I let it go. And instead say, "One more question."

"The blood thing?" He looks both wary and amused.

"Of course the blood thing! And the *going outside when it's light* thing. I thought vampires could only be outside when it's dark."

He looks uncomfortable for a minute, but then he squares his shoulders and says, "That depends."

"On what?"

"On what kind of blood they drink. Here at the school, Foster serves animal blood. If we drink only that, we can be outside in the sunlight. If we choose to...supplement with human blood, however, then we have to wait until it's dark."

I think about his comment in my room, about how we could

go out, since civil twilight had started. "So when I got here, I saw you outside because you were only drinking animal blood. But now—" I blush, and it's my turn to shift my face away. Not because I'm necessarily embarrassed by what Jaxon and I do but because it feels so intimate to talk about the fact that he—

"You mean, now that I've been drinking your blood on the regular?"

And the blush gets even worse. "Yeah."

"Yes. I drank from you. And Cole. And then you again in the tunnels. So, no light for me."

"For how long?" I ask, because it's been days since the tunnels, and he definitely hasn't drank from me since—even though I've kind of wanted him to. But apparently me nearly dying of blood loss has him less than eager to sink his fangs into my neck any time soon.

"Until the hormonal spike that comes from metabolizing human blood wears off." When I look mystified, he continues. "It's like humans and insulin. When you eat high-carb foods, your insulin spikes and takes time to come down. When I drink human blood, my body secretes a hormone that makes it impossible for me to be in the sun. It takes about a week for all traces of that hormone to disappear. Animal blood doesn't trigger the same hormone."

I count back in my head. "It's been six days since the tunnels. So by tomorrow, you should be able to go out in the sun again."

He shrugs. "Probably the day after to be safe. And that's if I don't..."

"If you don't bite me again." A sudden surge of heat flares through me.

Now he's the uncomfortable-looking one. "Something like that, yeah."

"Something like that?" I put my cup down on the bench and

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wrap my good arm around his waist. " Or that exactly?"

He looks down at me, eyes dark and just a little bit dangerous. "That exactly," he murmurs. And I know—if I wasn't covered from head to toe in piles of clothes, he might very well be biting me right now. The idea gives me a thrill I don't even try to pretend away.

"Stop looking at me like that," Jaxon warns. "Or I'm going to take you back to your room, and we're not going to do what I brought you here for."

Not going to lie. Going back to my room suddenly sounds pretty good. Except... "Why are we here?"

"Why else?" He reaches into his backpack and pulls out a long, skinny carrot and a hat. "To build a snowman."

"A snowman?" I gasp. "Really?"

"Flint's not the only one who knows how to play in the snow around here." His face stays relatively expressionless, but there's a bite to his words that has me wondering all kinds of things. Including if Jaxon could possibly be jealous...which seems absurd, considering Flint tried to kill me on three separate occasions. Not a lot there to inspire jealousy.

"Well, are you coming?" Jaxon asks as he leans down and starts scooping snow into a giant ball. "Or are you just going to watch?"

"It's a good view," I tell him, openly checking out his very fine ass—which is encased in way fewer layers than mine currently is. "But I'll help."

He just rolls his eyes at me. But he does wiggle his butt a little—which makes me laugh. A lot.

It's not long before we're both cracking up as we stare at what has to be the world's most lopsided snowman. Which makes sense for me, because I'm a San Diego girl. But Jaxon has lived in Alaska for years. Surely he's built a snowman before.

I start to ask, but there's something about the way he's staring at our snowman that makes me hold my tongue. Even as it makes me wonder if maybe Jaxon hasn't had much time to play in his life—even when he wasn't first in line for the throne.

The thought makes me sad as he looks around for stones to use for the snowman's eyes. He's been through so much in his life. It amazes me how he could have gone through all of that and still emerge on the other side, this boy who feels so much. Who cares so much. And who is willing to try to play for me.

It humbles me even as it makes me ache for him.

The ache only gets worse as I remember the question that's been nagging at me on and off since I woke up in that infirmary three days ago. "Jaxon?"

"Yeah?" Something in my voice must tip him off, because his smile fades into concern. "What's wrong?"

"I've been meaning to ask..." I take a deep breath and blurt out the question I've tried so hard to ignore. "Where did Hudson go? I mean, we saw Lia die. But where did the black smoke go? Did it die with her? Or..." I don't finish, because the thought is too horrible.

But Jaxon's never been one to sugarcoat things—or avoid them. His face turns grim as he answers, "I haven't figured that out yet. But I will. Because there's no way in hell I'm risking Hudson being set loose on the world a second time."

There's such vehemence in his tone that it hurts to hear it, especially knowing how much Jaxon has already suffered because of his brother. I hate that he's had to go through so much, hate even more that the threat of Hudson coming back will probably hang over us forever.

After all, it's hard to relax when a homicidal sociopath has it out for you...and the rest of the world.

Jaxon's obviously better at dealing with his fear than I am,

though—or maybe it's just that he's had longer to live with the threat. Whatever it is, he's able to shoot me a real smile as he finally makes the snowman a face out of stones and the carrot he brought for the nose. "Come on," he says. "You get to do the pièce de résistance." He hands me the hat.

It's the first time I've really looked at it, and when I do, it makes me laugh. And laugh.

Because maybe I wasn't being ridiculous earlier after all. Maybe Jaxon actually is jealous of Flint.

Jaxon just shakes his head at me. "Are you going to put the hat on him or what?" he demands.

"Oh, I'm going to put the hat on." I step forward and do just that before moving back to where Jaxon is standing so we can both admire him.

"What do you think?" Jaxon asks after a moment. And even though he sounds like he's ready to make a joke, I can hear a little bit of vulnerability in his voice. A tiny little need for my approval that I never would have anticipated.

So I turn back and look at our poor, lopsided, listing-to-oneside snowman and, despite the cold, nearly melt all over again. Because to me, he looks perfect. Absolutely perfect.

I don't say that, though. I can't without revealing to Jaxon that I see more than he ever imagined. So instead, I tell him the only truth I can. "The vampire hat is a really nice touch."

His grin is huge. "Yeah, I thought so, too."

He reaches for my hand at the exact same moment I reach for his. And it feels good. More than good.

It feels right.

For the first time, I let myself think about what Lia said before she died, about me being Jaxon's mate. I don't know what that means, but as he pulls me close and his warmth slowly spreads through me, I can't help thinking that maybe I should find out.

Why Can't a
Girl Just Have an

not borrowing trouble.

our days later, I finally get to start classes again—for real this time, complete with Brit Lit homework, a research paper on the causes of the Salem Witch Trials, and my very first counseling appointment with Dr. Wainwright. Plus, actual makeup work for what I missed when a psychopathic vampire tried to murder me. Which seems a little unfair, if you ask me, but who am I to complain when I get to spend every morning,

Ordinary HEA

These Days?

We're together right now, in fact, grabbing breakfast in the cafeteria and joking around about Luca's latest dating debacle—which, even I have to admit, is a doozy.

every lunch period, and nearly every evening with Jaxon, who is doing an admirably good job of staying in the moment and

I'm eating brown sugar Pop-Tarts—Macy grabbed the last pack of cherry ones, because she's mean like that—and Jaxon and the rest of the Order are drinking their morning rations of school-supplied elk blood out of opaque tumblers. Turns out, that's what all the big orange beverage coolers are for—feeding the vampires.

Cam still hasn't worked up the nerve to join us yet, but Macy

has high hopes for him finally coming around. I'm not so sure—Jaxon's reputation has only grown more intimidating since what happened with Lia got around, and nearly everyone is giving him an even wider berth than usual. I keep telling him they'd relax a little if he smiled more, but so far he hasn't taken my advice. Personally, I think it's because he believes that the more scared they are, the safer I am.

I don't necessarily agree, but I do have to admit things have been shockingly quiet lately. No one has tried to poison me or turn me into a human sacrifice in at least ninety-six hours. It's definitely a record, one I am more than happy to ride out as long as possible.

The warning bell rings as I take my last sip of tea, and I glance up to find Jaxon staring at me, a (very) slight smile on his lips. "What's up?" I ask as I grab my Pop-Tart wrapper and mug.

"Just looking at you." He leans over, presses a kiss to the corner of my mouth. "Wondering what you're thinking about."

"You," I answer. "Just like always."

Rafael pretends to gag. "No offense, but could the two of you try to refrain from sending the rest of us into sugar shock?"

"Vampires don't metabolize sugar the same way regular humans do," I inform him with a grin. "Hence, no sugar shock."

"Now look what you've done," Mekhi interjects. "You've created a research monster. She's obsessed."

"Pretty sure it's the librarian who's done that," Jaxon answers dryly. "Every day, Amka has as least five more books for Grace to check out."

"Hey, if I'm going to live with vampires, I need to know as much about them as possible," I tell them as I stand up and tuck in my chair. "It's pretty normal to want to learn about your surroundings."

"You know what else is normal?" Jaxon asks as he bends

crave

down so his mouth is only a few scant inches from mine.

"I have a pretty good idea," I answer, tilting my face up so that our lips can meet.

"Look at us," I whisper against his mouth a few seconds later. "Being normal."

He scrapes a fang across my lower lip, gives me a sexy look that turns my insides to mush. "Almost normal."

"I'll take that."

He grins. "Yeah, me too."

He moves in for another kiss, one that makes my head swim and my knees tremble, and I can't help but melt against him. I've never been big on PDA, but Jaxon has me breaking all the rules, and I'm pretty sure I'm doing the same for him. Especially if Lia's right and we really are mated.

Not that I've told him that yet. I mean, the boy's already terrified of this whole relationship thing. If I bring up a word like mate—something Macy spent a long time explaining to me a couple of days ago—I'm pretty sure the earthquake Jaxon generates will crumble the school.

It's Mekhi's turn to snark about how sick he is of being late to class because *some people* can't keep their lips to themselves. Jaxon flips him off, but the words must sink in, because he pulls away from me and reaches for my backpack.

"Come on. I'll walk you to class."

"You don't have to do that." I glance at the clock. "You'll be late to physics."

He shoots me a give-me-a-break look. "Somehow I'm sure they'll survive without me for five minutes."

I'm not so sure about that, but I know enough about Jaxon—and the sudden, stubborn set of his jaw—to know when to argue and when to let it go. Besides, letting him walk me to class comes with an extra perk. With him next to me, no one is going to bump

into my still aching shoulder or any of my other injuries.

It's a win-win situation.

At least until we pass a small group of dragons on our way out of the cafeteria. Jaxon ignores them, and I try to, but Flint is right in the middle. And he's trying to catch my eye.

I want to ignore him, I really do. But like I told Jaxon the other day, there's a part of me that understands why he did what he did. I mean, I'm not ready to start roasting marshmallows with him again, but I can't hate him, either.

And I can't ignore him.

Instead, I let my gaze meet his for a couple of seconds. His eyes widen and he gives me the grin that's been making me laugh since my first day at Katmere. I don't laugh this time, but I do smile just a little as I walk on by. And for now, it's enough.

I kind of expect Jaxon to say something about what just happened as we weave through the halls, but he doesn't say a word. Guess I'm not the only one learning to compromise. I squeeze his hand just a little harder in a silent thank you, but he just kind of shakes his head in response.

It all feels very normal, and very right.

I know Jaxon still worries—and will continue to worry—that his being with me makes me a target. And there's a part of me that knows he's right. That I will never be safe if we're together.

But no matter what he thinks, it's not Jaxon's job to protect me. I've known from the first day that he wasn't meant to be the hero of my story. And I am more than okay with that.

Because he smiles now in a way he never did before. He laughs. And, on occasion, he even tells me a really bad joke or two. I'll take that over safe any day, especially when safety can be snatched away at any moment.

Which reminds me... "Hey, you never did tell me the punch line of that joke from the other day."

We stop a few feet away from my classroom, partly to take advantage of the now nearly empty hallway and partly in an effort not to freak my whole Brit Lit class out again.

"What joke?" he asks, puzzled.

"You know. The pirate one. Remember? What did the pirate say when he turned eighty?"

"Oh, right." Jaxon laughs. "He says..."

I never do get to hear the punch line. A flash over Jaxon's shoulder catches my attention. It's followed immediately by a noxious and eerily familiar cloud of black smoke. I start to stumble backward, to drag Jaxon with me. But it's too late. Because when the smoke clears, someone who can only be Hudson Vega is standing there, a giant broadsword in his hand—aimed straight at Jaxon's head.

The horror on my face must register, because Jaxon starts to glance over his shoulder. But the sword is already swinging. There's no time for him to even see the threat, let alone react to it.

Terrified, I grab his arms and yank him toward me. But even as he falls forward, I know it's not going to work. He's still in the blade's path. For a moment, just a moment, I flash back to how he looked last night when we were stretched out on his bed. He was leaning over me, resting on his elbow. Sleepy smile, eyes hazy with want.

His hair had fallen forward into his face, and I reached up to push it back so I could see his eyes...and, for the first time, as my hand grazed his scarred cheek, he didn't flinch. His smile didn't falter and he didn't duck his head. He didn't turn away. Instead, he stayed right there with me. In the moment.

Relaxed.

Happy.

Whole.

And that's when it hits me. Jaxon was never meant to be the

hero of my story...because I was always meant to be the hero of his.

So, in the end, I do the only thing I can do. I wrap myself around him and spin us around so that my back is to the sword. And then I close my eyes and wait for the blow I've always known would come.

She Persisted

hen the fuck is she going to turn back, Foster?"
"I don't kn—"

"Don't tell me that again. Don't fucking tell me you don't know." I turn on the librarian and the Biology of Ancient Creatures teacher who are sitting in front of the headmaster's desk and demand, "Aren't you supposed to be able to figure out what the hell is going on around here? What the fuck is the point of putting you people in charge of this school if none of you can answer a simple fucking question?"

-Jaxon-

"It's *not* a simple question, Jaxon." The headmaster pinches the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger.

"Sure, it is. One minute, Grace was in my arms, blocking Hudson's attack." My throat closes up at the thought of those frantic, frenzied moments. Of the way she tried to drag me away, and when that didn't work, how she threw herself between—

I cut off the thought before it can derail me and this entire conversation with it. Because if I think about it now, if I think about what she did... The ground beneath my feet starts to tremble and damn it, just damn it. The only thing keeping me from leveling the whole fucking school is the knowledge that I

might hurt Grace in the process.

I take a deep breath before continuing. "One minute, she was there. And now Grace... Grace is..." I can't say it. I can't fucking say that she's gone, because if I say it out loud I can't take it back.

If I say it out loud, then it's true.

"She was there, Foster," I repeat. "Warm, alive, *Grace*. She was right there. And then she was—" The ground rumbles yet again, and this time I don't even try to control it.

Instead, I walk over to the corner, where what's left of Grace—my Grace—is standing. "Why can't she just turn back?" I demand for what feels like the millionth time. "Why can't you make her turn back?"

"I know it's hard for you, Jaxon." Dr. Veracruz speaks for the first time. "It's hard for us, too. But we haven't seen one for a thousand years. It's going to take time to figure out what went wrong."

"You've had four days! Four days. And you can't tell me anything more than that! How am I supposed to get to her if you can't even tell me what's wrong?"

"I think you're going to have to accept that you can't get to her," Foster says, and for the first time I realize that he looks and sounds nearly as bad as I do. "I think we're going to have to accept that she's not going to come back until she wants to."

"I don't believe that," I tell him, voice hoarse and hands clenched into fists in an effort not to lose it completely. "Grace wouldn't leave me like this voluntarily. She wouldn't leave me."

"Everything I've read in the last four days says she should be able to turn back on her own," Amka tells me. "Which means only two things are possible."

"Don't say it," I warn her.

[&]quot;Jaxon-"

"I mean it, Foster. Don't fucking say it. Grace isn't dead. She can't be dead."

Because there's no way I can keep myself from breaking wide open if she is.

No way I can stop myself from razing this school to the fucking ground. And if Hudson somehow has her... If he's hurting her...just the thought of what he's capable of—and what she might be going through because of it—sends a bolt of terror skittering down my spine and twisting in my stomach. If he's harmed her in any way, I'll find him. And then I'll set him on fire just to watch him burn.

"She's not dead," I tell them again as I stare into her beautiful face. Her eyes are closed just like they were in that last second in the hallway, but that doesn't matter. I don't need to see her eyes to know how she feels about me—it's written all over her face. She loves me, almost as much as I love her.

"If she's not dead—and I agree with you that she's not," Dr. Veracruz says, "then the only other option is she's *choosing* not to come back."

"You don't know that. She could be trapped—"

"We do know that," Amka reminds me firmly. "Gargoyles can't get trapped in their stone forms. If they don't change back to human, it's because they don't want to."

"That's not true. Hudson's doing something to her. He's—"

"Jaxon." Foster's voice slices through my denials. "Do you really think Grace would change back if she thought she was bringing a threat to Katmere?" The headmaster holds my gaze, eyes somehow both solemn and fierce at the same time as I will him not to say what he's thinking—what we're both thinking. "Or to you?"

Pain slices through me, destroying me. Eviscerating me where I stand. I can barely think, barely breathe, through the

agony of knowing that he's right. Of knowing that Grace might very well be suffering at this very moment—to save me.

I told her about Hudson, told her about my mother. She knows how much killing him nearly destroyed me. If coming back means bringing Hudson back with her, if it means making me kill my brother again, then there's no way Grace would do it. No way she would let me face that.

"She's saving me, isn't she?" I whisper, barely loud enough for myself to hear it.

But Foster hears it, and he braces a hand on my shoulder. "I think she might be."

There's no might about it. Because Grace loves me. She's already saved me once. I have no doubt that she'll stay locked in stone for as long as she has to. She'll stay locked in stone for as long as it takes to keep everyone she cares about here at Katmere safe.

And she'll stay locked in stone forever if it means saving me again.

My heart starts racing at the realization. My hands shake, my breath turns choppy and it takes every ounce of strength I have to stay on my feet.

I can't let her do it. I've barely made it through four days without Grace. No way can I make it through eternity without her.

For a moment, just a moment, I let myself remember all the little things I love about her. And ignore the fact that every memory breaks me a little more.

The way her eyes go all soft whenever she's touching me.

The way those same eyes narrow when she's about to call me out on my crap.

The way she laughs when she tells those awful jokes.

How do you cut the Roman Empire?

With a pair of Caesars.

That was a bad one. Hell, they were all bad ones, but that didn't matter when she giggled up at me, so proud of herself.

Fuck. I miss her.

I miss her sugar-cookie-and-strawberry scent.

I miss her softness, the way her ridiculously hot body always curves so perfectly into mine.

I miss her curls.

This time when I reach out, it's not to stroke her hair. It's to cup her stone-cold cheek the way she always cupped mine.

And tell Foster something that I desperately hope Grace can hear, too. "I'm going to find a way to separate her from Hudson. And I'm going to contain or kill him or do whatever I have to, to make sure he's never a threat to anybody ever again."

"That might not be enough, Jaxon," Amka says. "She might choose—"

"It'll be enough," I tell them. Because she loves me. Because she knows that I can't last much longer without her.

I lean forward, press my forehead to hers for one second, two. And whisper, "I'm going to find a way to stop him, Grace. I swear. And then you're going to come back to me. Because I need you. I need you to come home to me."

I close my eyes and swallow down everything else I want to say. Because it doesn't matter. Nothing does without Grace.

She has to make it back. Because if she doesn't, I'm going to shatter. And this time, I'm not sure I'll be strong enough not to take the whole world with me when I do.

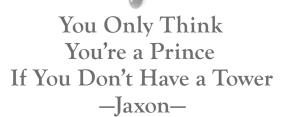
END OF BOOK ONE

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But wait—there's more!

Read on for an exclusive look at three chapters from Jaxon's point of view.

Nothing will ever be the same...



can't believe Foster did this. Just flat-out can't believe he did this. I'm spending every fucking hour of every fucking day trying to keep this whole thing from turning into a massive shit show, and Foster goes and does this. Un-fucking-believable.

"Is that her?" Mekhi asks from his spot on the couch behind me.

I look down at the girl currently climbing off the snowmobile in front of the school. "Yes."

"What do you think?" Luca chimes in. "Does she look like good bait?"

"She looks..." Exhausted. It's in the way she bows her head after she takes off her helmet. In the way her shoulders slump. In the way she looks at the stairs like they're the biggest obstacle she's ever seen in her life. Exhausted and...defeated?

"What?" Byron comes up behind me and peers over my shoulder. "Oh. Defenseless," he murmurs after a minute.

And yes, that's exactly the word I've been looking for. She looks *defenseless*. Which, no doubt about it, makes for great bait. It also makes me feel like shit. How the fuck am I supposed to use a girl who already looks like life has kicked her in the teeth

about a dozen times?

Then again, how can I afford not to? Something's going on. Something big. Something fucked-up. I can feel it, and so can the other members of the Order. We've been trying to ferret it out for days, but no one's talking...at least not to us. And since we don't want to come right out and start pushing in case we send whoever is responsible for what promises to be a disaster of monumental proportions scurrying for cover, we're screwed if we don't find some bait to follow.

"Defenseless is good, right?" Liam asks in typical asshole fashion.

I shoot him a look as he grabs a thermos of blood from the mini refrigerator at the bottom of one of my bookcases. He holds a hand up in semi-apology, then explains, "I mean, it'll lull whoever's behind whatever this is into a false sense of security."

"Or it will make her that much easier for them to kill," Rafael answers. The words are careless, though his tone is anything but. No surprise there, considering he's always had a soft spot for damsels in distress. He's also the only one who's been against this plan from the beginning.

But I don't know what else to do. I can't afford to ignore whatever is happening below the surface. Not if I want to prevent another war...or worse.

I turn back to see that she's made it up the steps now, though it looks a little like she's going to fall back down. I want to see her face, but she's so bundled up, I can't get a good look at anything but the wild corkscrew curls sticking out from beneath her hot-pink hat.

"So what are you going to do?" Mekhi asks. "What will you say to her?"

I don't have a fucking clue. I mean, I know what I *planned* to say to her. What I *should* say to her. But sometimes *should*

is a long way from what is. Hudson taught me that...and so did our mother.

Which is why, instead of answering my best friend, I ask, "What else do I need to know about?"

"Jaxon—" Rafael starts, but I shut him down with a look.

"What else?"

"The dragons are back in the tunnels," Luca volunteers in his rolling Spanish accent that makes everything seem not quite as bad as it actually is. "I haven't been able to figure out what they're doing yet, but I will."

"And the wolves?"

Liam gives a sarcastic laugh. "Same old assholes, different day."

"Like that's ever going to change?" Mekhi asks with a fist bump.

"It'll never change," I agree. "But beyond the usual, anything I should be aware of with them?"

"Nothing beyond howling at the moon like a bunch of criminals." Byron's still looking out the window, and I know he's thinking about Vivian. "When are you going to do something about that?"

"They're wolves, By. Howling at the moon is pretty much what they do," I tell him.

"You know what I mean."

I do. "They're not going to hurt anyone else the way they hurt her. I've got Cole's word on that."

"Yeah." He snorts. "Like there's anything trustworthy about Cole. Or his mangy pack of mutts."

It's been five years, but in vampire years, that's nothing. Especially when it comes to losing a mate.

"She's going inside," Byron murmurs, and a quick glance at the front of the school tells me he's right. The pink hat, and the girl it belongs to, are nowhere to be seen.

"I'll be back," I tell them, pulling off the red Katmere Academy hoodie I've been wearing all day and tossing it on the back of the nearest chair. After all, nothing says intimidating like a school sweatshirt...

I take the steps three at a time on my way down. I don't have a clue what I'm going to do right now—if anything—but I do want a look at the new girl. I want to see what kind of trouble she is. Because if there's one thing I do know, it's that she is going to be all the trouble.

It's a feeling that gets reinforced the second I see her standing alone, back toward the stairs and anyone who might want to sneak up on her as she looks at the chess table half hidden by the alcove at the bottom of the stairs.

And what the hell? She's been here all of two minutes, and Macy and Foster just leave her alone out here? Where anyone could approach her?

And by approach her I mean hassle her...or worse.

In fact, I'm not even all the way down the stairs before Baxter is sidling up to her, eyes burning and fangs flashing, just a little.

I get his attention, give him a look that tells him to back the hell off. Not because I actually care if he drinks the little human dry—and she is little, barely five foot four—but because there are rules. And one of those rules is, very definitely, don't eat the headmaster's niece. More's the pity, because she smells really good. A combination of vanilla and honeysuckle underlays the slight tang of too many hours of travel.

Makes me wonder just how she'd taste.

But since drinking her—dry or otherwise—is out of the question, I shove the thought down deep and take the last half set of stairs in one leap.

She still doesn't notice, and I can't help wondering if she's

got a death wish or if she's just spectacularly unobservant.

I'm hoping it's the latter, because the former would definitely complicate things. Especially here at Katmere, where, at the moment, it feels like nearly everyone is hanging on to civilization by a thread. Myself definitely included.

I move up behind her as she picks up a chess piece and starts turning it around like it's the most fascinating thing in the world. Curious despite myself, I peer over her shoulder to see just what she finds so fascinating. But when I see what piece she's looking at—dear old Mom in all her glory—I can't help but lean in a little closer and warn, "I'd be careful with that one if I were you. She's got a nasty bite."

She jumps like I've actually bitten her instead of simply pointed out the danger. So simply unobservant, then, not a death wish. Things are looking up.

I start to warn her about turning her back on anyone in this place, but she whirls around before I can get the words out. And as our gazes collide, I lose all sense of what I was going to say.

Because fuck. Just fuck.

She's everything and nothing like I expected her to be.

She's fragile, like all humans. So easily broken—just a twist of my hand or a slice of my fangs and she could easily be dead. Problem solved, except, of course, for the shit storm Foster would unleash.

But as she looks up at me with startled eyes the color of rich, melted milk chocolate, I'm not thinking about killing her. Instead, I'm thinking about how soft her skin looks.

About how much I like the way her curls frame her heart-shaped face.

About whether the cluster of freckles on her left cheek forms a flower or a star.

And I'm sure as hell thinking about what it would feel like

to sink my teeth into that spot right below her ear.

What she would sound like when she asked me to do it.

What she would feel like against me as she offered herself.

What she would taste like on my tongue... If it's anything like how she smells, I'm afraid I might not be able to stop. And I can always stop.

It's not a realization I'm comfortable with, especially considering I came down here to check her out and make sure she wasn't going to cause any trouble when things are already so messed up. And here I am, suddenly thinking about—

"Who's got a nasty bite?" Her tremulous voice interrupts my thoughts, has me looking past her to the chess table...and the piece she dropped when I startled her.

I reach past her, pick up the vampire queen—even though she's pretty much the last thing I ever want to touch—and hold her up for Foster's niece, for *Grace* to see. "She's really not very nice."

She stares at me blankly. "She's a chess piece."

Her confusion amuses me—as does her determination to pretend that she's not afraid of me. She's got enough bravado that it might work on another human, but not with me. Not when I can smell her fear...and something else that makes me stand up and take notice. "Your point?" I ask, because poking the human is way too much fun.

"My point is, she's a *chess* piece," she answers, and for the first time, she's brave enough to look me in the eye. Which I like, way more than I should. "She's made of *marble*," she continues after a moment. "She can't bite anyone."

I incline my head in a *you never know* gesture. "There are more things in heaven and hell, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Considering the clusterfuck we are currently in the middle of, a little *Hamlet* seems more than appropriate.

"Earth," she responds.

Which has me raising a brow at her. Not only does she know the quote, but she's not afraid to call me on my "mistake."

"The quote is, 'There are more things in heaven and *earth*, Horatio."

"Is it, now? I think I like my version better."

"Even though it's wrong?"

"Especially because it's wrong." She sounds incredulous and looks it, too. Which amuses me even as it concerns me. Because it means my first impression was right—she really is unobservant. Not to mention totally and completely clueless. All of which means she's going to get slaughtered up here—or she's going to cause a war. Or both.

I can't afford to let that happen...for everyone's sake. Not when I've worked so hard—and given up everything—to keep that from happening.

"I need to go." Her eyes are wide, the words high-pitched and a little squeaky.

It's the last straw, because if she can't handle a basic conversation with me on my best behavior, how the hell is she going to make it so much as a day here?

"Yeah, you do." I take a small step back, nod toward the common room—and the school entrance. "The door's that way."

Shock flits across her face as she demands, "So what, I shouldn't let it hit me on the way out?"

I shrug just before giving her an answer guaranteed to send her running for the hills. The fact that it also makes me sound like a total douche is for me to regret and for her to never know why. "As long as you leave this school, it doesn't matter to me if it hits you or not. I warned your uncle you wouldn't be safe here, but he obviously doesn't like you much."

Anger flashes across her face, replacing the uncertainty.

"Who exactly are you supposed to be, anyway? Katmere's very own unwelcome wagon?"

"*Un*welcome wagon?" I repeat. "Believe me, this is the nicest greeting you're going to get here."

"This is it, huh?" She raises her brows, spreads her arms out wide. "The big welcome to Alaska?"

The snark surprises me as much as it intrigues me—which is *not* acceptable...on any level. The knowledge has me snarling, "More like, welcome to hell. Now get the fuck out," as much as a warning to myself as an attempt to scare her senseless.

Too bad it doesn't work—on either front. Because she doesn't shut down at my warning, and she sure as hell doesn't run away. Instead, she just looks down her very cute nose at me and demands, "Is it that stick up your ass that makes you such a jerk? Or is this just your regular, charming personality?"

Shock washes over me—no one talks to me like that. Ever. Let alone some human girl I could kill with little more than a thought. With it comes a quick lick of frustration. Because I'm trying to save her life here, and she's too unaware to even notice.

I need to change that—and fast. Narrowing my eyes at her, I snap, "I've got to say, if that's the best you've got, I give you about an hour."

It's her turn for her brows to go up. "Before what?"

"Before something eats you." Obviously.

"Seriously? That's what you decided to go with?" She rolls her eyes. "Bite me, dude."

If she only knew how much I want to do just that... The angrier she gets, the better she smells. Not to mention how good she looks with flushed cheeks and the pulse point at the hollow of her throat beating double-time.

"Nah, I don't think so," I tell her even as my mouth waters

and my fangs threaten to elongate with every rapid pound of her heart.

I want to taste her. Want to feel the softness of her body leaning into mine as I drink my fill. As I drink and drink and—I cut off the thought. Force myself to look her up and down disparagingly before answering, "I'm pretty sure you wouldn't even make an appetizer."

I step closer, determined to intimidate her—determined to get her out of here before all hell breaks loose and she gets hurt "Maybe a quick snack, though." I snap my teeth fast and hard. Then do my best to ignore the way she shivers at the sound.

It's so much fucking harder than it should be. Especially when she refuses to back down like anyone—everyone—else would. Instead she asks, "What is *wrong* with you?"

And shit. I nearly laugh at that, because "Got a century or three?" That just might be long enough to scratch the surface of my answer, if I was honest.

"You know what? You really don't have to be such a—"

Behind us, everyone is circling, straining to hear. None of them is stupid enough to actually wander by too close, but I can feel them there just around the corner. Listening. Waiting. Strategizing.

Which means enough is more than enough. Time to get serious about scaring her away. "Don't tell me what I have to be," I growl. "Not when you don't have a clue what you've wandered into here."

"Oh no!" She does a mock-afraid face, then asks, "Is this the part of the story where you tell me about the big, bad monsters out here in the big, bad Alaskan wilderness?"

And damn, but she impresses me. Sure, it's frustrating as hell that she's not taking any of this seriously, but it's hard to blame her when all she knows is what she's getting from me. In fact, I'm impressed she's doing such a good job of holding her own—not many people can against me.

Which is why I respond, "No, this is the part of the story where I show you the big, bad monsters right here in this castle." I step forward, closing the small distance she managed to put between us.

She needs to know that if she's going to walk around this place challenging people like that, there will be consequences. Better that she learn it from me than from one of the shifters who likes to claw first and ask questions later.

She must read the intent in my face, because she takes one trembling step back. Then another. And another.

But I follow suit, moving one step forward for every step she takes backward, until she's pressed right up against the edge of the chess table. Nowhere else to go.

I need to scare her, need to make her run from this place as far and as fast as she can. But the closer I get to her, the more I lean toward her, the more I want to do anything but scare her away.

She feels so good pressed against me, smells so good, that it's hard to focus on the endgame. And when she moves, her body bumping into mine again and again, it's even harder to remember what the endgame is.

"What are—?" Her breath catches in her throat. "What are you doing?"

I don't answer right away—because I don't have an answer beyond, *The wrong thing. I'm doing the wrong thing.* But knowing that doesn't seem to matter when she's right here in front of me, her brown eyes alive with a million different emotions that make me feel things I haven't let myself feel in way too long.

But none of those is the answer I need to give her right now. None of them is even a thought I should have. So instead of saying what I want to say, I pick up one of the dragon pieces. Then hold it for her to see and answer, "You're the one who wanted to see the monsters."

She barely glances at the piece. Instead she sneers, "I'm not afraid of a three-inch dragon."

Silly girl. "Yeah, well, you should be."

"Yeah, well, I'm *not*." Her voice is strained, and I start to think that maybe I'm getting through to her. Except right now, she doesn't smell afraid. In fact, she smells— Fuck, no. I'm not going to go there, no matter how much I suddenly want to.

Instead, I pull back enough to put some space between us. And to watch her freak out a little as the silence between us grows longer and longer.

Eventually, I break the silence—and the tension building between us—because I know that she won't. "So if you aren't afraid of things that go bump in the night, what *are* you afraid of?" And then I work really hard to pretend that her answer doesn't matter to me.

At least until she says, "There's not much to be afraid of when you've already lost everything that matters."

I freeze as her words slam into me like depth charges—sinking deep and then exploding so fast and hard that I'm afraid I'm going to shatter right here in front of her. Agony I thought I was long past rips through me, tearing me open. Making me bleed when I thought I had already hemorrhaged everything I had to lose.

I shove it back, shove it down. And can't understand why it's still right here in front of me—until I realize that this time, the pain I'm seeing is hers.

It's terrible and terrifying to realize that she carries some of the same wounds, if not the same scars, that I do. Knowing that, recognizing it, makes it so much harder for me to back away.

Makes it nearly impossible for me to do what I know I need to.

Instead, I reach out and gently take hold of one of her curls. I like them because there's so much life there, so much energy, so much joy that touching one makes me forget all the reasons it's impossible for me to let her stay.

I stretch out the curl, watching as it wraps itself around my fingers of its own volition. It's silky and cool and just a little coarse, yet it warms me like nothing has in way too long. At least until she brings her hands up between us and pushes at my shoulders.

And still I don't back away. I can't. At least not until she whispers, "Please."

It takes me a second—maybe two or three—before I finally find the will to move away. Before I finally find the strength to let that one, single curl, that one, single connection, go.

Frustrated with myself, with her, with this whole fucked-up situation, I shove a hand through my hair. Then wish I hadn't when her eyes immediately go to my scar. I hate the fucking thing—hate what it is, hate where it came from, and hate even more what it represents.

I look away. Duck my head down so my hair quickly covers it up again.

But it's too late. I can see it in her face and her eyes.

Can hear it in the breath that catches in her throat.

Can feel it in the way she moves toward me for the first time instead of away.

And when she reaches out, when she cups my scarred cheek in her cold, soft hand, it's all I can do not to shove her away. Not to run as far and as fast as I can.

Only the irony holds me in place—the idea that I came down here to scare her away for her own safety and now am considering fleeing for mine.

But then our gazes connect, and I'm held in her thrall, completely captivated by the softness and the strength in her eyes as she strokes her thumb across my cheek over and over and over again.

I've never felt anything like it in my too-long life and nothing—nothing—could make me break the connection now.

At least until she whispers, "I'm sorry. This must have hurt horribly."

The sound of her voice combined with the glide of her thumb across my skin sends electricity arcing through me. Has my every nerve ending screaming in a mixture of agony and ecstasy as one word washes through me over and over again.

Mate.

This girl, this fragile human girl whose very life is even now balanced on the edge of a yawning precipice, is my mate.

For a moment, I let myself sink into the knowledge, into her. I close my eyes, press my cheek against her palm, take one long, shuddering breath, and imagine what it would feel like to be loved like that. Completely, irrevocably, unconditionally. Imagine what it would be like to build a life with this smart and snarky and brave and battered girl.

Nothing has ever felt so good.

But people are all around us, watching us—watching me—and there's no way I can let this continue. So I do the one thing I don't want to do, the one thing every cell in my body is screaming against. I step back, putting real distance between us for the first time since I walked down those stairs, what now feels like a lifetime ago.

"I don't understand you." They aren't the words I need to say, but they are the ones I have to.

"There are more things in heaven and hell, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy," she answers, deliberately

using my earlier misquote with a smile that slices right through me.

I shake my head in a vain effort to clear it. Take another deep breath and slowly blow it out. "If you won't leave—"

"I *can't* leave," she interjects. "I have nowhere else to go. My parents—"

"Are dead. I know." Rage burns inside me—for her, for what she's suffered, and for all the things I want to do for her but *can't*. "Fine. If you're not going to leave, then you need to listen to me very, very carefully."

Her eyes widen in confusion. "What do you-?"

"Keep your head down. Don't look too closely at anyone or anything." I lean forward until my lips are almost pressed against her ear, fighting the instincts roaring to life inside me with every breath we both take as I finish, "And always, *always* watch your back."

Before she can answer, Foster and Macy come down the hall toward us. She turns to look at them, and I do what I have to do to keep her safe—do the only thing I can do in these ridiculous circumstances. I quickly fade to the stairs—the speed of it helping me pretend that each step away from her doesn't cut like jagged, broken glass.

I plan on going back to my room, but I don't make it that far. Instead, I stop just around the corner and listen to her voice as she talks to Foster. Not the words, just her voice, because I can't get enough of her. Not now. Not yet.

Soon enough. I'm going to have to give this up.

Soon enough, I'm going to have to stay as far away from her as I possibly can. Because if I thought it was bad for her to be used as bait, that's nothing compared to the danger of being a human mated to a vampire. And not just any vampire but one who holds the fate of the world in his hands.



watch Grace head out the door with Flint and Macy and tell myself to walk away. That there's nothing to worry about. That she's going to be fine. And know, even as I say it to myself, that I'm going to follow them anyway.

Follow her anyway.

They're out in the snow now, moving slowly enough that any predator with half a mind could catch them—while walking backward on a leisurely afternoon stroll. I wait for Flint to get fed up, to try to hurry Grace along, but he doesn't do it. Instead, he walks close to her, laughing at whatever she's saying, making her laugh in return.

It's enough to make my blood boil, considering that's my mate he's trying to charm. And my mate he might very well be trying to kill. That thought does something way worse than make my blood boil. It makes every part of me freeze, every nerve in my body arrested with horror—and a rage so cold, it burns like ice.

Despite my determination to go unnoticed, I draw closer to them. Alarm bells are going off inside me, driving me to break all the rules I've held myself to for the last year. Making me do things that I normally wouldn't even consider.

Then again, the last year has been all about doing things I wouldn't have imagined. Things I wouldn't wish on anyone, even a monster like myself. And now, here I am, trailing my ex-friend through the snow as I try to figure out exactly what Flint is up to.

There was a time not so long ago that I would have trusted him unconditionally, a time when he would have done the same for me. But that was a long time ago—in events if not in actual years. And now...now I don't even trust him with a simple snowball fight.

I sure as shit don't trust him with my mate.

The three of them finally make it out to the clearing where everyone is waiting. I stay in the trees, watching as Flint moves to the center of the group. He cracks a few jokes, loosens everyone up, then lays down the most ridiculous rules in existence—I should know. We made them up together years ago. Back when I got to at least pretend that I was like everyone else.

Grace watches him the whole time. It's enough to set my teeth on edge...and more than enough to make me feel like some kind of stalker. I'm only here because every instinct I have is screaming at me that something is wrong, that my mate is in danger, but it's still hard to justify peering at her from behind a tree like some kind of creep. Especially when she seems totally absorbed in another guy.

For a minute, just a minute, I think about heading back to the school. But then Flint finishes his rules and beckons like some kind of prince for Grace and Macy to join him. They do—of course they do—and Grace reaches up and pulls on his stupid dragon hat. Flint laughs and bends his head to give her better access, and I see fucking red.

Bloodred to be exact.

It takes every ounce of control I have to stay where I am, fists

clenched and teeth on edge, as I try to figure out exactly what game Flint is playing. If he's playing a game at all.

He bends down to talk to Grace, to whisper something in her ear that I'm too far away to hear—even with my heightened senses. And when his fucking lips nearly brush the small strip of exposed skin at the top of her cheek, my fangs explode in my mouth.

I'm suddenly a whole lot closer to them without having made any conscious decision about moving, thoughts of murder and mayhem blazing a trail through my brain.

I tamp them back, shove them down deep. And pretend to myself that I'm not tracking Flint's every move like a predator about to strike his prey.

"Chill," Mekhi tells me from his spot behind a tree several yards away. For the first time, I'm glad he and the others wouldn't let me come out here alone. Ostensibly, it was for my own protection—that's how they roll—but now I can't help but wonder if it's for everyone else's as well.

Fuck. I close my eyes, run a hand over my face. When it comes to Grace, I need to get my shit together...and fast. Because the universe might have decreed that she's my mate, but that doesn't mean anything if she doesn't agree. And Flint comes with a lot less baggage than I do—is it any wonder she's laughing so easily with him?

I need to move back, to give them a little more room and maybe get this damn bloodlust under control.

But then the game is on, and Grace, Macy, and Flint are running into the trees on the other side of the clearing. I let them go, determined to watch from here. But since I apparently have no self-control when it comes to this girl, my resolution lasts about five seconds before I start making my way toward them stealthily—no reason to have to explain to anyone else what I'm

doing out here when I'm not even sure myself.

I skirt around a group of witches who aren't even bothering to make snowballs. Instead they're firing streams of snow at one another in what looks to be a wholly ineffectual but amazingly fun exercise in futility. At least until a witch named Violet manages to pick up enough snow to leave her opponents buried in the stuff.

They screech as they try to burrow their way out, and I'm left grinning as I slide by unnoticed. Looks like the snow spelling wasn't so ineffectual after all.

Grace is several trees in front of me now, making that arsenal of snowballs I suggested. She's laughing, and I realize it's the first time I've heard her do that since she got here. It's a good sound, a happy sound, and I grin even though Dragon Boy is responsible for it. It's nice to hear her happy.

I grab a tree branch and swing myself up the regular way. It's fast and a lot more fun than using my telekinesis to levitate. And when I climb up a few more branches to the top of the tree, it gives me a hell of a view of the action.

Some of the wolves are still in the clearing, knocking the shit out of one another with one superpowered snowball after another. The witches are dropping snow and icicles from nearby tree branches on every person foolish enough to walk under one. And the dragons are stockpiling, staying out of the action for now as they hoard snowballs like they do their jewels down in the tunnels beneath the school. It's definitely the most pragmatic approach—it won't be long before they have enough of an arsenal to take down anyone who comes near them—but I'd be lying if I said I didn't admire the witches' approach the most. Ambushing anyone who walks by with a pile of snow on their head is both ingenious and fun as hell to watch.

A nearby shriek in a familiar voice has me focusing on Grace

with laser-like precision. And grinning like a fool as she tries desperately to wipe away a face full of snow. At least until Flint reaches over and helps her clear out her scarf, his hands suddenly way too close to the petal-soft skin of her cheeks. The same skin I've been dreaming about touching ever since she cupped my jaw with her hand.

And when she looks up at him with a laugh and a toss of her curls—hot-pink hat definitely included—a low growl that I have no control over emanates from my throat. Even before Flint hands her that fucking dragon hat and helps her fill it with snowballs.

The growl only gets worse when he actually puts his hands on her, picking her up and tossing her over his shoulder like she belongs there. And when he wraps an arm around her upper thighs to hold her in place, I swear I can feel his jugular beneath my fangs.

If he drops her, if he harms so much as one hair on her head, I'm going to fucking kill him. And if he doesn't...I just might kill him anyway. Especially if he doesn't get his hands off her in the next five seconds.

Relief shimmers through me as he deposits Grace safely on one of the lower branches, and I take my first real breath in what feels like hours.

Then I settle back to enjoy the show as Grace pelts everyone who walks by with snowball after snowball. She's got remarkably good form for someone who's never had a snowball fight before.

At least until a brisk wind comes up out of nowhere. Grace falters a little, and my stomach bottoms out as she grabs on to the tree trunk for support. And by the time another gust shakes the tree even harder, I'm already moving—sliding down my own tree even as I scan the surrounding area to see if the wind is natural or creature-made.

The rest of the Order is right behind me.

I'm down the tree and halfway to Grace—and about to call the wind natural despite the bizarre coincidence—when I spot Bayu several yards away. The dragon is still in human form, but he's facing Grace's tree with his mouth wide open. Everything between him and Grace—snow, trees, people—is buffeted with a powerful wind.

Fury sweeps through me. With a slice of my hand and a flash of my telekinetic power, I lift him several feet off the ground and send him hurtling into the nearest tree trunk.

He hits hard enough to knock himself out, and that's all I care about. There's a part of me that wants to stop and drain him dry for even thinking about threatening Grace, but right now I have bigger things to worry about. Namely the fact that while the wind dragon is currently incapacitated, the last of the breeze he released definitely isn't. And it's headed straight for my mate.

I take off running toward Grace, but, fast as I am, I'm too late. The wind has been buffeting the tree, and her, for too long. I can hear the branch she's on crack from here. And Flint, the fucker, is doing absolutely nothing to help her.

A million thoughts run through my head in an instant. Pulling Grace off that branch and floating her safely down to the ground. Wrapping a telekinetic hand around Flint's traitorous throat and squeezing until his fucking eyes pop out. Holding the tree branch in place until I can get there and catch her.

But as the branch gives another ominous crack, I go with the most expeditious—and easily explainable to someone who doesn't know about vampires or dragons—solution and yank Flint out of the tree just as Grace starts to fall.

He's a big guy—dragons usually are—and turns out, he makes a really good landing spot to break her fall.

Of course, Flint knows it's me who yanked him out of the

tree—knowledge that I am more than okay with him having. The second he hits the ground, he's lifting his head, looking around to try to spot me. But if dealing with Hudson taught me anything, it's the value of guerrilla warfare. Never let them see you until they're already dead.

Today is no exception as I indulge a particularly satisfying fantasy of ripping Flint's fucking head from his fucking traitorous body. And that's before my mate tries to scramble off him and only ends up straddling him instead, her knees on either side of his hips.

As she tries to make sure he's okay after he just participated in an attempt on her life.

The irony is fucking painful, especially when the jackass reassures her he's fine. And puts his hands on her hips in a gesture that makes every cell in my body yearn for destruction. It's a feeling that doesn't go away, even after Grace scrambles off him and starts alternating between yelling at him and thanking him for jumping out of the tree to save her.

And when she steps forward, looking like she wants to check out up close and personally if he's really okay, I give up any attempt at staying cool.

Screw decorum. Screw the art of surprise. Screw everything. No way is my mate putting her hands—or any other part of her body—on that jackass one more time, at least not while she's ignorant of Flint's part in her taking a header out of that tree.

I fade through the space between us, roughly the size of three football fields, in a flash. There are people milling around Grace and Flint, but the second they realize I'm here, they back the fuck up. Fast.

And then I'm there, staring down at this girl whose mere existence has changed everything, and wishing desperately that I had met her a year ago, before everything in my life and the world around us went to total and complete shit.

The yearning is so powerful that for a second, I'm barely aware of Flint.

Or my friends, who have suddenly lined up behind me in a very obvious show of solidarity.

Or the crowd, who's watching every second of the drama with greedy eyes. All I can see or hear or think about is Grace.

But then Flint moves, whether in an attempt to apologize or tell me off, I don't know. And I don't care. He got Grace up that tree deliberately so Bayu could knock her out of it, and if he thinks I'm just going to let him get away with that, then his grasp of reality is in serious jeopardy right now.

Actions have consequences, and murder attempts mean there will be hell to pay. Even if I don't yet know what kind of hell it's going to be. I do know, however, that he's going to give me some kind of answer about this debacle before we leave. Or I'll tear him limb from fucking limb right here, right now.

"What the hell did you think you were doing?" I demand when he finally has the nerve to look me in the eye.

Flint doesn't answer me right away—the coward—and I start to ask again, more forcefully this time. Except Grace steps between us before I can and whispers, "I fell, Jaxon. Flint saved me."

It's like setting a rocket off inside me. Finally hearing my name on her lips feels damn good, but listening to her defend Flint is about to make my head explode. "Did he?" I ask, reverting to sarcasm in an attempt not to tear Flint apart.

"Yes! The wind kicked up, and I lost my balance," she implores. "I fell out of the tree, and Flint jumped after me."

I'm about to question the veracity of that statement—from Flint's point of view, anyway—when Grace reaches out and touches his shoulder like he's the big, brave hero who saved her.

"What's wrong?" she asks, and it burns my ass. "Are you hurt after all?"

There's a lot I want to say to that, but I can't. Not here and not now, so once again I lock it down deep and pretend that it isn't there.

Seconds later, a small quake rips through the earth.

Behind me, Byron says my name—quietly—and I shut that shit down fast. It's harder than it should be, considering the only way I've gotten through everything I've had to do for the last year is to lock down my emotions until I forget that I even feel anything at all.

I'm not sure anyone even noticed the quake, because no one says a word. Instead, Flint shrugs off Grace's hand and says, "I'm fine, Grace." Which means he's smarter than he looks.

Except she's not buying it. "Then what's wrong?" she asks, looking back and forth between us. "I don't understand what's happening here."

There's nothing to say, so I don't answer—and neither does Flint, probably for the same reason. Grace looks confused, and everyone else around us looks like they're seconds away from rubbing their hands together with glee—even as the dragons move into place behind Flint, making sure the Order and I know that they have his back.

Like that will matter if I decide to destroy him.

Macy must sense the growing danger, because suddenly she pipes up from nowhere. "We should go back to the room, Grace. Make sure you're okay." Her voice is a lot higher than I've ever heard it.

"I'm fine," Grace assures her, once again looking between the dragon and me like she thinks I'm going to do something stupid. Which, not going to lie, I just might if we don't get the hell out of here and soon. Then she continues. "I'm not going anywhere."

And yeah, that's not going to work for me. Not when she's here surrounded by who knows how many people who want to hurt her. Or worse.

I take a couple of steps closer to Grace until I'm right behind her, so close that I can smell the warm cinnamon and vanilla scent of her. "Actually, that's the best idea I've heard all afternoon. I'll walk you back to your room."

No way am I letting her go anywhere alone.

The crowd recoils at my words. Like, I actually see people drawing back, eyes wide, mouths open, faces slack with shock. Not that I blame them. I'm acting way outside the norm now. Everyone wants to watch, but no one wants to get in my way.

Smart move. With the mood I'm in, the first person to challenge me might very well end up dead. Or at least with two very distinct marks in their neck.

It's a feeling that is only reinforced when Grace says, "I need to stay with Flint. Make sure he's really—"

"I'm fine, Grace," Flint grates out from between clenched teeth. "Just go."

"Are you sure?" She reaches out and tries to lay a hand on his fucking shoulder again. But this time I'm there between then, preventing her hand from landing. Then I step forward, moving her slowly, inexorably away from Flint and back toward school.

She doesn't object, though the look on her face holds about a dozen questions. Maybe even more.

"Come on, Macy," she says, eventually reaching for her cousin's hand. "Let's go."

Macy nods, and then we start walking back toward the castle—Macy, Grace, and me. I nod to the Order to stay where they are until the crowd starts to disperse, so that's exactly what they do.

Grace and I walk in silence for a minute or two until she

turns to me and asks, "What are you doing out here anyway? I thought you weren't going to join the snowball fight."

I don't have an answer to that, so I prevaricate with, "Good thing I was out here, considering the mess Flint got you into." I very deliberately don't look at her to keep myself from saying something stupid.

"It really is no big deal," she assures me, but there's something off in her tone even before she continues. "Flint had me. He—"

"Flint very definitely did not have you," I snap, her defense of that damn dragon setting me off like few things have in a very long time. I stop to face her, determined to make her understand. "In fact—" I break off, eyes narrowing at the flicker of pain that flits across her face. "What's wrong?"

"Besides not being able to figure out why you're so mad?" She brushes off my concern.

But that doesn't stop me from looking her over from head to toe. "What's hurting you?"

"I'm fine," she insists.

"You're hurt, Grace?" Macy joins the conversation for the first time, and I'm embarrassed to admit I almost forgot she was even with us. Then again, next to Grace, everyone pales in comparison.

"It's nothing," Grace repeats, but it's not very convincing. Especially when she continues to walk—and winces with every step she takes.

I grind my teeth together and resist the urge to make a comment about just how stubborn she is. Instead I ask, "What hurts?" and give her a look that tells her I'm not budging on this until she's honest with me.

She stares back, giving as good as she's getting. But eventually she backs off with a disgruntled sigh. "My ankle. I must have twisted it when we hit the ground."

As soon as I know what's wrong with her, I kneel down and probe her foot and ankle as gently as I can through her boot. She gasps a little, and the fact that I'm hurting her, even accidentally, goes through me like a particularly powerful current. "I can't take this off out here or you'll get frostbite. But does it hurt when I do this?"

She gasps, and I ease away, pissed off that I hurt her. Even more pissed off that I let her get hurt to begin with.

"Should I run ahead and get the snowmobile?" Macy asks. "I can be back before too long."

"I can walk. Honest. I'm okay," Grace says, but her voice sounds as pathetic as she looks.

I shoot her an incredulous look as I reach down and help her to her feet. Then, because she very obviously can't walk, I swoop her into my arms. And do my best to ignore the fact that holding her feels better than anything has in the entire hundred years of my existence. I'm out the front door before Grace can even make it down the first step.

I know I should probably stick around, but I can't do that. Not right now. Not when she's got that bandage on her neck and other ones on her arm and cheek. And not when I know that I'm the asshole who did it to her.

I close my eyes for a second—just a second—and it all flashes back. The earthquake. The window exploding under the force of my power. The moment the glass sliced into Grace's neck.

I've never been more terrified in my life. Fear isn't something I experience very often—when you're the scariest thing in the night, you tend to not worry about what else is bumping along next to you. But watching that glass hit Grace, watching her blood spray all over the room and realizing the glass had sliced an artery... Yeah, terrified doesn't even begin to cover how I felt.

The next five minutes are a blur. I remember licking her throat closed in an effort to stop the blood, remember bits and pieces of gathering her in my arms, but fade full-out for Marise as Grace lay white and still in my arms.

I'd nearly killed her because I couldn't control myself.

Nearly killed her just because being near her makes me feel so much that I can't lock it away.

Nearly killed her because when it comes to her, I'm weak. So weak that I unwittingly let the energy build up and nearly mated her without even asking her permission.

It's a humbling realization...and an awful one. I've spent my entire life protecting people from the terrible power and unchecked selfishness of my family. And now, three days with my mate and suddenly I'm blowing out windows, shaking the fucking earth, and nearly bonding with her without even letting her know what's going on?

What the fuck am I thinking?

But that's just it. I haven't been thinking, not since I walked down those stairs that first evening and saw Grace standing by the chess table. From that moment on, all I've been thinking about is making her mine. And now she's nearly died, twice, all because I can't get my shit together enough to take care of her—to watch over her—the way I should.

But what's the alternative to us being there together? Leave Katmere Academy—school to the children of the most influential monsters in the world—right now, when we're on the brink of yet another war? Especially when that war has been largely caused by my own family?

Or should I get Grace to leave? I already tried that the first day, all but ordering her to get the hell out because I wanted her more than I've ever wanted anything—a feeling that only grows with each day she's here. She didn't go when I told her to because she couldn't, because she doesn't have anywhere else to be.

Because she belongs at Katmere Academy, the animalistic voice deep down inside me snarls. More, she belongs with me.

Because she's my mate. My mate.

Even after five days, I still can't get over the wonder and the

terror that one simple word engenders in me.

Every vampire has a mate, but finding them in your first two hundred years is practically unimaginable. Byron found Vivien early, but that's because they were born into the same small town in France and were raised together as friends long before they ever knew they were mates. The rest of us just have to bumble around until we find ours...and that's if we're lucky.

I haven't told anyone else about Grace, not even Mekhi or Byron, because labeling her as such puts her in even more jeopardy than she's already in. Which, apparently, is a hell of a lot, considering her mate can't even fucking protect her from himself.

I never should have gone to her room today. I should have left Grace the hell alone. But I'm selfish and I'm weak and I couldn't not see her. I couldn't not check on her, couldn't not make sure she was okay, no matter how much doing so fucked things up even more.

But that was before I saw her over Macy's shoulder, covered in cuts and bruises from the flying glass. Battered, bandaged, broken. And realized, mate or not, the best thing I can do for her is to leave her the fuck alone.

The thought has me recoiling, has the monster deep inside me screaming in rage. But that just makes me move faster, desperate to put as much distance between Grace and me as I possibly can.

There are miles between us now, and still it isn't enough. Still, I can feel her blood calling out to me, her taste like nothing I've ever experienced before. When I licked the small drop of her blood off my thumb that very first night, the taste of her nearly brought me to my knees. Last night was worse. I wanted her blood even as it spilled over me, even as I tried desperately to stanch the flow that would kill her if left unchecked.

I already know I'm a monster, but what does that need—that craving—in the middle of a life-and-death crisis make me?

Desperate? Evil? Irredeemable?

And when did that happen? When I killed Hudson? Or years, decades, before?

I keep fading, even though I don't have a clue where I'm going, as I race across the snow. It doesn't really matter, though, as long as it's far away from Katmere...and from Grace. I can't think when she's that close, her blood calling to me—one more temptation that I can't afford to give in to.

Not if I want to keep her safe.

Not if I want to keep her whole.

And I do, more even than I want to make her mine.

It's that thought that finally gives me direction. A quick glance at the GPS on my phone tells me just how close I already am to my newly decided-on destination. So close that I can't help wondering if my subconscious was guiding me here all along.

I take a quick left at the base of a mountain I once lifted a hundred feet in the air—a training exercise for twelve-year-old me—and fade another twenty miles through the snow to an ice cave whose entrance is almost completely obscured by the snow at the base of the mountains that surround it.

I pause when I reach it, take a minute to get my thoughts, and the rest of me, under tight control. The Bloodletter might be the mentor who taught me almost everything I know, but that doesn't make it any easier to go in there. The most vicious and powerful vampire in existence, the Bloodletter is an expert at ferreting out weakness. And then using it to destroy you with barely more than a word or two.

I spent twenty-five years of my life right here in this cave at the queen's insistence, learning to harness my powers. And how to use them to destroy any enemies of the throne, also at the queen's insistence. The Bloodletter made sure I could do all of that...and so much more. It's been a blessing and a curse.

When I've finally got my defenses in place, any thoughts of Grace shoved down deep inside me, I take a few long breaths. And begin my descent into the ice.

There are safeguards on the entrance, protections woven into the air and rock and ice as ancient as the Bloodletter. I dismantle them without a thought—as I was taught all those years ago. Or, more accurately, as I figured out through very painful trial and error.

The ground slopes steeply down, a narrow path carved through ice and igneous rock. I traverse it quickly, winding my way through beautiful and deadly ice formations from memory alone. Eventually, I get to a fork in the path and take the way on the right, despite the feeling of dread that overwhelms me the moment I step down it.

More safeguards, which I also undo, making sure to weave them back in place before I continue deeper into the cave. Normally, this part of the walk is done in total darkness, but today lit candles line both sides of the path. I wonder if the Bloodletter is expecting someone...or if some sacrifice has recently been made by someone seeking some kernel of the knowledge the Bloodletter so stingily doles out.

One more bend in the path, one more fork to traverse—I go left this time—and one more set of safeguards. Then I've finally arrived in the antechamber before the Bloodletter's quarters. The room is huge and also lit with candles that illuminate the brilliant ice and rock formations that line the walls and ceiling in all directions.

A small river of ice runs right down the center of the room. It's currently frozen solid, but I've seen it as running water as well. In the middle of summer and, of course, at a flick of the Bloodletter's fingers. When I was young, I used to think it was the River Styx, carting the souls of everyone who failed the

Bloodletter's trials straight to Hell without benefit of a ferryman.

More than once I threw myself into it on the off chance that a one-way trip to Hell would finally end my torment. It didn't.

I look around, take a second to collect myself one more time. And do my best to ignore the human carcasses hanging upside down in the corner, draining into a couple of large buckets on the floor. More proof that nothing has changed. The Bloodletter lures humans to the cave instead of going out to hunt. Some are eaten fresh and some are...stored for when the weather is so bad that this area is nearly deserted. It's a more efficient use of time for everyone involved, I was always told.

Right before I was punished for never fully draining my victims...not to mention leaving them alive.

I look away from the bloody carnage, take one more deep breath. And step right through an ice archway into the Bloodletter's living room.

It's exactly as I remember. The walls are painted a cozy periwinkle blue and flames snap in the rock fireplace that dominates one of the side walls. Bookshelves filled with first editions line two of the other walls and an abstract rug in shades of sunrise stretches across the ice floor.

In the center of the room, facing away from the fire, are two antique wingback chairs in brown leather. Across from them, separated by a square glass table, is a velvet sofa in dark violet.

And sitting on that sofa in a bright-yellow caftan, legs curled up beneath her, is the Bloodletter, knitting what I'm pretty sure is a winter hat in the design of a fully fanged vampire.

"Took you long enough to get through the safeguards." She glances at me over the top of a pair of half-moon glasses. "Are you going to stand there all day or are you going to come on in and sit down?"

"I don't know." It's the most honest answer I've ever given.

She smiles, pauses in her knitting just long enough to pat her short gray curls a couple of times. And gesture for me to have a seat. "Come on. I'm making you a present."

The hat is almost done, which means she started it long before I even decided that I was coming...which is not exactly a surprise, now that I think about it.

"What exactly am I going to do with a hat?" I ask, even as I follow her directions.

She grins, her bright-green eyes twinkling against the warm brown of her skin as she answers, "Oh, I'm sure you'll think of something."

I have no idea what to say to that, so I just nod and wait for her to say something else. The Bloodletter has never been fond of anyone speaking first.

Turns out, at the moment, she's not interested in talking at all. So I sit in the leather chair for almost an hour, watching as she puts the finishing touches on a vampire hat I have absolutely no interest in wearing.

Finally, when she's done, she ties off the yarn and puts everything beside her on the couch. "Thirsty?" she asks, nodding toward the bar in the corner.

I am, but a flashback to the humans draining right outside this room has me shaking my head. "No, thanks."

"Suit yourself." She gives a delicate little shrug as she stands up. "Well, come on, then. Let's take a walk."

I stand and follow her toward a second archway near the back of the room. The moment we pass through, the icy floor and walls of what I vaguely remember as my training room transform into a summer meadow, complete with wildflowers and the sun beating down warmly upon us.

"So," she says after we've walked several minutes in silence. "Are you going to tell me what's bothering you?"

"I'm pretty sure you already know."

She makes an affirmative sound, along with a face that says, *Maybe I do*. But she doesn't volunteer any information.

"How are you?" I ask after a few seconds. "I'm sorry I haven't been by in a while."

She waves a hand. "Oh, child, nothing to worry about on that front. You've had bigger fish to fry."

I think of Hudson and my mother and the nightmare of keeping the different factions from dissolving into civil war. "Yeah, I guess you could say that."

"I am saying it." She reaches up, rests a hand on my shoulder. "I'm proud of you, my boy."

It's the last thing I expect her to say. An unexpected lump blooms in my throat in response, tightening up my vocal cords until I have to clear my throat several times before I can speak. "That makes one of us."

"Don't do that." The hand on my shoulder goes from comforting to slapping the back of my head from one instant to the next. "You've done more for this race than anyone in the last thousand years. Be proud of that. And be proud of the fact that you've found your mate."

"So you do know why I'm here."

"I know why you think you're here."

I look away, only to end up staring at a patch of wildflowers in a shade of bright pink that I will associate with Grace until I take my last breath. "How do I do it?" I ask, and the earlier tightness in my throat is nothing compared to how I feel now.

I can barely breathe.

"Take her as a mate?" Her brows go up.

"You know that's not what I mean." I clench my fists and pretend this conversation isn't making me want to hit something... or throw up. Or both.

She sighs heavily. "There is a way."

"Tell me."

"Are you sure, Jaxon? Once you do it, there's no coming back from it. You can't just fix what's been torn asunder."

"I won't want to fix it." I grind the words out past clenched teeth.

"You don't know that." She waves a hand, and the meadow transforms into Grace's dorm room. Grace is curled up in bed, reading something off her phone while Macy flits around her. She looks beautiful and fragile, and I want nothing more than to wrap my arms around her. Want nothing more than to protect her from everything...even if that everything includes me. Especially if it does.

"Finding your mate is a precious thing," the Bloodletter continues. "Finding her so young is even more special. Why would you give that up if you don't have to?"

"They're already gunning for her. I don't know why yet, but she's a pawn in some plan they have to do God knows what. Overthrow the vampires? Bring about the civil war I've worked so hard to stop? Get revenge for what Hudson did? I don't know. I just know that I can't let her get hurt because of decisions I made that have nothing to do with her."

I mean every word I'm saying, but that doesn't make them hurt any less. I've never had anything that was mine in my whole life—my mother saw to that. Yet here Grace is, right in front of me. She's meant to be mine. And still I can't afford to reach for her. Not if it means risking something happening to her because of me.

"You know she'll never be safe in this world. You know they'll kill her just to make me suffer."

The Bloodletter waves her hand, and once again, we're walking in the meadow. I have to bite my lip to keep from begging

her to bring Grace back, even as she answers, "I know they'll try."

"Eventually they'll succeed." I say it as much to remind myself as her. "They always do."

"Not always." She gives me an arch look meant to remind me of what happened a year ago. Like I need reminding. "Have a little faith, will you?"

I snort. "In myself?"

"In yourself and your mate."

"I have all the faith in Grace. But she's human. Vulnerable." I think back to the spurting blood, to the deep cuts on her shoulder and her neck. "Breakable."

She laughs. "We're all breakable, my boy. Part of being alive." She points a finger at me. "And your Grace might surprise you, you know."

"What are you talking about?" I ask. Then, tired of all her riddles and partial advice, I can't help demanding, "Can't you just tell me what you mean? Can't you just tell me what to do?"

"Nobody can tell you what to do, Jaxon. It's been your greatest strength—and your greatest problem—your entire life. Why change that now?"

Impatience wells up inside me, overwhelming the last of my fake calm. "Damn it! I just need to know how to break the mating bond."

This time when she smiles, there's a flash of razor-sharp incisors. "Careful how you speak to me, my boy. Just because I'm fond of you doesn't mean I won't drain you for a midwinter meal. You taste quite good if I remember correctly."

It's an old threat, one neither of us pays much attention to anymore. But I do shut my mouth because there's another threat implicit in that one—mainly that she won't help me after all.

We walk in silence for several minutes, until I'm all but vibrating with a desperate impatience, convinced I'm going to jump out of my skin at any second. Only then does she take hold of my hand.

"This will tell you how to do what you seek," she says to me, pressing a folded piece of paper into my palm and curling my fingers over it.

I want to ask her where the paper came from, but the truth is, I don't care. Not now that I have the means to save Grace within my grasp.

"Just be make sure it's what you really want." She repeats her earlier warning. "Because once you break what's between you and Grace, you can't ever put it back together again."

It absolutely hurts to hear her say that, to imagine an endless life without my mate. Without Grace. But when the alternative is watching her suffer—and die—so people can get to me, there really is no alternative.

"Thank you," I tell the Bloodletter, shoving the paper deep into my pocket.

"You're welcome, my sweet boy." This time when she lifts her hand, it's to pat my cheek. "I do love you, you know."

"I know," I agree, because in some strange way, it's true.

"And if even a crusty old vampire like me can love you, I'm pretty sure a girl as strong as Grace can, too." She winks at me before dropping her hand and stepping away. "Besides, you're forgetting one thing."

"What?" I ask, a tiny flare of hope kindling to life inside me despite my best efforts.

"There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio, / than are dreamt of in your philosophy." She takes another step back, transforming into a winged creature I don't recognize right before my eyes.

And then she flies away, leaving me with the answer I sought and a host of questions I don't have a clue how to even ask.

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Part of me wants to stick around and wait for her so we can talk some more—sometimes she's willing to do that after she feeds. But the second I walk back toward her main quarters, my phone starts buzzing with a series of texts from Grace and Mekhi.

They come in a mismatched order, though, so I head out of the cave and back into cell service range in an attempt to get the whole story. Which is when they start showing up fast and furious. As I read them, I forget all about waiting for the Bloodletter to return. I forget all about everything except getting to Grace—to my mate—as soon as possible. I need to make sure she's okay, and I need to make sure that whoever had the nerve to bite her understands just what a terrible life choice they made.

It's as I'm racing back to Denali that it hits me.

It doesn't matter who I have to fight to keep her safe. It doesn't matter what I have to do to hold on to her. Grace is my mate, and there's no way I'm giving her up. No matter what.

And what a stupid idea anyway—to sever the bond before Grace even knows it exists? This is a choice both of us need to make, and I was a total asshole to ever think otherwise.

Which is why the first thing I do when I get back to Katmere is to reach into my pocket and pull out the note the Bloodletter gave me. I don't even bother to open it before I tear it up and drop the pieces in the nearest trash can on my way up the stairs.

After all, I have a mate to see to, and nothing is going to stand in the way of that.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tracy Wolff is a #1 New York Times and USA Today bestselling author and a lover of vampires, dragons, and all things that go bump in the night. A onetime English professor, she now devotes all her time to writing dark and romantic stories with tortured heroes and kick-butt heroines. She has written all her sixty-plus novels from her home in Austin, Texas, which she shares with her family.

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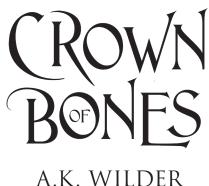


Zera is a Heartless—the immortal, unaging soldier of a witch. Bound to the witch Nightsinger, Zera longs for freedom from the woods they hide in. With her heart in a jar under Nightsinger's control, she serves the witch unquestioningly.

Until Nightsinger asks Zera for a prince's heart in exchange for her own, with one addendum: if she's discovered infiltrating the court, Nightsinger will destroy Zera's heart rather than see her tortured by the witch-hating nobles.

Crown Prince Lucien d'Malvane hates the royal court as much as it loves him—every tutor too afraid to correct him and every girl jockeying for a place at his darkly handsome side. No one can challenge him—until the arrival of Lady Zera. She's inelegant, smart-mouthed, carefree, and out for his blood. The prince's honor has him quickly aiming for her throat.

So begins a game of cat and mouse between a girl with nothing to lose and a boy who has it all.



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A young heir will raise the most powerful phantom in all of Baiseen.

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A mysterious and deadly Mar race will steal children into the sea.

And a handsome guide with far too many secrets will make me fall in love.

My name is Ash. A lowly scribe meant to observe and record. And yet I think I'm destined to save us all.

New York Times bestselling author Pintip Dunn asks, "Could you take a life to save a million?" in her #OwnVoices YA romantic thriller

MALICE

What I know: someone at my school will one day wipe out twothirds of the population with a virus.

What I don't know: who it is.

In a race against the clock, I not only have to figure out their identity, but I'll have to outwit a voice from the future telling me to kill them. Because I'm starting to realize no one is telling the truth. But how can I play chess with someone who already knows the outcome of my every move? Someone so filled with malice she's lost all hope in humanity? Well, I'll just have to find a way—because now she's drawn a target on the only boy I've ever loved...

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